

# USA

## Who are the Guantánamo detainees?

### **CASE SHEET 16**

Sudanese national: Sami al Hajj

11 January 2006

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Full name: Sami al Hajj

Nationality: Sudanese

Occupation: Cameraman/journalist

Age: 35

Family status: Married with one child

#### **Background**

Sami al Hajj was a journalist working for the television station al Jazeera. He was visiting his brother and sister in Damascus when the station called him to ask him to go on his second ever assignment. It was around 22 September 2001, less than two weeks after the attacks on the US mainland on 11 September, and he was being asked to cover the international conflict in Afghanistan.

His brother told Amnesty International that Sami al Hajj was reluctant and nervous about going to the conflict zone, but decided that it would not be his best career interests to turn down such a prestigious assignment.

Sami al Hajj travelled with a film crew to Afghanistan, via Pakistan. After 18 days covering the conflict he returned to Pakistan, thinking his assignment over. In December 2001 he was asked by the television station to return to Afghanistan to cover the inauguration of the new government there. Before he and his crew managed to reach the border, they were stopped by Pakistani police. Sami al-Hajj was the only one of his crew taken into custody.

#### **Arrest in Pakistan and transfer to US authorities/Treatment in Afghanistan**

Sami al Hajj was held in Pakistani custody from 15 December 2001 to 7 January 2002. He had his passport taken off him, his visa to travel to Afghanistan and his press card. On 7 January he was transferred to US custody and taken to Bagram air base in Afghanistan.

Sami al Hajj has described the 16 days he spent in detention in Bagram air base as “the worst in my life”. He states that he was severely physically tortured and had dogs set upon him, that he was held in a cage a freezing aircraft hangar and was given insufficient, often frozen food.

He was then transferred to Kandahar, where his abuse continued. Sami al Hajj alleges that:

- He was subjected to sexual abuse by US soldiers, including being threatened with rape
- He was forced into stress positions, being forced to kneel for long periods on concrete floors
- He was beaten regularly by guards
- He had all the hairs on his beard plucked out one by one
- He was not allowed to wash for over 100 days, and he was covered with lice

### **Transfer to Guantánamo and treatment**

Sami al Hajj was transferred to Guantánamo Bay on 13 June 2002. Hooded and shackled and gagged for the duration of the flight, if he fell asleep the US soldiers would strike him on the head to wake him up.

After his transfer to Guantánamo, Sami al Hajj says that he was constantly interrogated about any possible links between his employers and Islamist extremists. He also alleges that the first time he was interrogated in Guantánamo he had been deprived of sleep for over two days. He said “for more than three years, most of my interrogation has been focussed on getting me to say that there is a relationship between al Jazeera and al Qa’ida”. He alleges that he has been subjected to a range of ill-treatment and has been denied access to adequate health care:

- Guards at the camp shattered his knee cap by stamping on his leg
- He has been beaten on the soles of his feet
- Military dogs were used to intimidate him on his arrival in Guantánamo
- He has been subjected to racist abuse and has been given less time for recreation because he is black
- Prior to being allowed to see Sudanese intelligence agents who had come to Guantánamo to interview him, he alleges that he was shackled and pepper sprayed

After witnessing the desecration of the Qu’ran in 2003 – US soldiers had reportedly written ‘fuck you’ [obscenities] and had stamped on a copy of the Qu’ran - Sami al Hajj and a number of other prisoners went on hunger strike. The retaliation of the camp authorities was swift and brutal. Sami al Hajj has said he was beaten severely, and thrown down a set of stairs. His face was reportedly badly gashed in this incident– a cut which a doctor said needed stitches, but would only be administered without pain medication. He was then placed in isolation before being taken to Camp V, the harshest of the camps in the detention facility, where he was held for eight months. During his time in Camp V, he was classified at security level 4, which ensures the harshest treatment and the fewest privileges.

Sami al Hajj also alleges that he was “ERF’d” – brutal cell extractions by guards in riot gear (called the Emergency or Extreme Response Force) – six times in ten days.

### **Medical Care**

Sami al Hajj has a number of pressing medical needs, and he alleges that the authorities in Guantánamo have consistently and systematically denied him access to the medical care he requires.

- He had throat cancer in 1998, and was on a course of drugs that he was prescribed for the rest of his life. He has not been provided with these drugs since being taken into US custody
- He has repeated the allegations made by other detainees that “the inoculations that have

been forced on the prisoners during the past three years are shots that contain diseases”

- Sami al Hajj also has rheumatism, problems with his teeth and bad eyesight. He has not received glasses or dental treatment.

Though it was apparently a US soldier who broke his knee cap, the authorities are reported to have refused to provide him with a support for his knee (as this contains metal and is classified as a security threat).

### **Hunger Strike**

In July 2005 Sami al Hajj embarked on a hunger strike along with up to 200 other detainees. In his own words, he states that “the demands [of the strike] include stopping the heavy handed approach to the prisoners, particularly those in Camp V, and to give us the health care we need so much. Also to stop the widespread practice of drugging the prisoners and manipulating their state of mind.” The demands also included that Camp V be shut down, because “conditions are so bad” in that modern, ‘supermaximum’ security style block.

The detainees called a halt to their hunger strike after the authorities reportedly made a number of promises to the detainees to improve their conditions of detention. It quickly transpired, however, that the harsh treatment of the detainees, and their legal limbo, would not cease.

The strike restarted in response to the beating of several detainees and the failure of the authorities to implement the promised reforms. Sami al Hajj expressed the desperation of the detainees restarting their hunger strike when he said that “it is not something that I look forward to, but I must”.

### **“ I wish to return to Sudan to resume my normal life with my precious family” – Sami al Hajj**

Sami al Hajj’s family were not informed of his arrest in Pakistan. They believe that the Sudanese government knew about his arrest but did not intervene and refused to inform the family. It was over one month after Sami al Hajj had been handed over to the US authorities that his family were informed of his detention.

They did not know he had been transferred to Guantánamo until six months after his arrest, when his wife received a letter via the ICRC.

Contact with the family has been intermittent, and letters that the family receive are generally heavily censored. The letters generally take around four months to arrive. Sami al Hajj’s brother told Amnesty International that they received only two letters last year. The same seems to be true in reverse. His brother sent a letter in 2003, but Sami al-Hajj was only allowed to read it in August 2005.

Sami al-Hajj has a five year old son, who he has not seen since he was one year old. As his brother said, “you can imagine how emotionally difficult it can be for a child for being so harshly deprived of the compassion and love of his dad”.

The family have suffered financially as well as emotionally as a result of Sami al Hajj’s detention by the USA. Since his father became ill, Sami al-Hajj had been the major breadwinner for the family, his finding work with *al-Jazeera* a major boost for all the family. The family have also found it very difficult to cope with the continued reports of torture and ill-treatment at Guantánamo.

# TAKE ACTION FOR Sami al-Hajj

## Write to the US authorities:

- Stating that Sami al Hajj and all the other detainees at Guantánamo Bay must be given fair trials or released
- Calling on the US authorities to keep Sami al Hajj's family fully informed of his legal status, health and well-being
- Calling for an impartial investigation into the allegations that Sami al Hajj was tortured in US custody in Afghanistan and Guantánamo Bay, and seeking assurances that he is being given appropriate medical care
- Calling for the US government to set up an independent commission of inquiry into all aspects of the USA's "war on terror" detention policies and practices
- Calling for the detention facility at Guantánamo Bay to be closed and for all other "war on terror" detention facilities to be opened up to external scrutiny

## WRITE TO:

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US Department of Justice  
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Washington, DC 20530-0001, USA  
Fax: + 1 202 307 6777  
Email: [AskDOJ@usdoj.gov](mailto:AskDOJ@usdoj.gov)

If you want to take further action on this case, please contact your national AI office  
Amnesty International, International Secretariat, Peter Benenson House,  
1 Easton Street, London WC1X 0DW, UK. [www.amnesty.org](http://www.amnesty.org)