



Reprive
PO Box 52742
London
EC4P 4WS

Tel: 020 7353 4640
Fax: 020 7353 4641
Email: info@reprive.org.uk
Website: www.reprive.org.uk

PRESS EMBARGO: FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

One final indignity for Sami Al Haj By Clive Stafford Smith (Sami's lawyer)

On Sunday May 4, Clive Stafford Smith, the Director of the legal action charity Reprive, travelled to Sudan to meet Sami Al Haj, the recently released Al Jazeera cameraman who has been represented by Reprive since 2005. This is his report, which includes a passage specifically refuting recent claims by Pentagon officials that Mr Al Haj, who had been on a hunger strike for 16 months prior to his release, and was taken to a hospital on his arrival in Sudan, "seemed like a healthy individual" as he departed from Guantanamo.

Even when they were about to release him, the US military was unwilling to treat Sami Al Haj with dignity.

The final days in Guantanamo Bay were very hard on Sami. There had been so many false promises that Sami was still uncertain whether he was going to leave, and for the last 15 days he stopped drinking water, in addition to refusing food. Only the food and liquid forced into him kept him alive.

The Admiral came himself to process Sami out. He brought a paper and read it out before telling Sami to sign it. The paper said that Sami recognized the right of the United States to take him as a prisoner again if he did anything wrong. Sami refused. He explained that I, as his lawyer, had told him not to sign any such document.

One of the soldiers told Sami quietly that even now they might refuse to allow him to leave. An American official was saying that Sami refused to change his clothes from orange to white, which they would interpret as a decision that he would not go. This was all false.

"I will wear anything if it means being free," said Sami. "I will even go naked, no problem. I want to get my freedom."

A kinder soldier told Sami that someone seemed to be trying to stop his travel. The soldier took Sami immediately to his cell from the force-feeding chair to change clothes.

At around 7 pm on Wednesday night [April 30], Sami was taken from his cell in Camp 1. An hour later, the bus started its trip to the airport. The drive took an hour, although it is not very far. There were black plastic trash bags all around the bus windows, so that Sami could not see anything. I have been along that road many times, and it is hard to see what anyone was afraid that he might see – McDonalds, perhaps, or the Guantanamo Golf Course.

When they reached the airport the aircraft waiting was similar to the one that had originally brought Sami from Afghanistan. Sami and the eight prisoners released with him had to enter through the rear of the plane. Walid Ali, another Sudanese, was next to Sami, and then Said Al Boujaadia from Morocco. Amir Yacoub was the third man from Sudan, and there were five Afghans.

Like each man, Sami had his eyes covered, muffs on his ears, and shackles on both his hands and legs. The plane took off at about 10.30pm that night on the first leg of the journey, a 15-hour flight to Baghdad, Iraq.

“When I first requested the toilet the guards said it was not allowed,” Sami said. “So I said I would do it in the chair.” The guards then took him to the toilet, but they would not close the door, unshackle his hands, or take off the eye cover. They said that they would pull his trousers down and sit him down, and added that he would not be allowed to use the tap to wash afterwards.

Eventually, after much argument about how this was senseless and uncivilized, Sami said that he could not use the toilet at all under these circumstances. As a result, the long hours ahead would not be pleasant.

There was no sleep to be had for all that time. When Sami tried to lean slightly one way so that he could rest, he was told that this was not permitted.

Sami ate nothing on the flight. In truth, he never intended to, as he had vowed to himself that he would remain on hunger strike until he was safely in Sudan. He had resolved that he would only break his protest by asking his wife to feed him – his first normal food for 16 months. But Sami wanted to know what the guards would say, so he suggested to Walid that he ask about food. The guards told him to keep quiet, that they would give it to him when the time came. Eventually, an hour and a half later, he was given a peanut butter sandwich. Sami ate nothing.

Neither did Sami drink, partly because of his ongoing protest, but more particularly because he knew he had to survive without a toilet for the duration of the journey. For the others, there was one bottle of water that they had to pass among themselves.

Baghdad was only a stopover. Everyone had to change planes. The Afghans were to go to Kabul, the rest would go first to Sudan, before the plane would take Said back to Morocco.

On the second leg of the flight, it was another four hours to Khartoum, a total of twenty in all. Twenty more hours of suffering before the aircraft finally touched down. By the end, Sami was weak, far weaker than when he left the prison in Cuba.

Even then, the American soldiers were not content to set him free. Before turning him over to the Sudanese authorities, they took off the metal cuffs, but replaced them with plastic restraints, so tight that they cut into his wrists.

“After the plane, the first thing I knew, I was here in the hospital,” Sami told me. It was a strange contrast to Guantanamo, where I recently met a shackled Sami in Camp Iguana. Now we were talking in the VIP room of the Khartoum hospital, with Sami wearing the white traditional robe of a Sudanese, smiling at those around him.

Earlier, a member of the medical staff had taken me aside to describe how they had feared for him when he had been transferred from the American soldiers onto a hospital gurney. He had been almost unconscious, and his life signs had dropped to dangerously weak levels. For a while, it seemed that Sami had only come home to die.

But fortunately this story turned out happily. While I was with him, the President’s wife came to pay her respects. President Bashir himself had come before her. Now Sami was smiling at his visitors, gently instructing his seven -year old son Mohammed to pass around the tin of sweets.

-- ENDS --

Clive Stafford Smith, lawyer for Sami Al Haj, is Director of the British charity Reprieve (www.reprieve.org.uk) which is dedicated to those facing injustice in Guantánamo Bay and other secret prisons around the world, and providing free representation to prisoners who cannot afford lawyers.

For further information contact Andy Worthington at Reprieve’s Press Office on +44 (0)20 7427 1099 or Andy@reprieve.org.uk