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The Australian: Hicks 'tied up and beaten' [20may04]

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THE AUSTRALIAN

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Hicks 'tied up and beaten'

By Rory Callinan, Swat Valley, Pakistan
20may04

US soldiers had something special in mind for David Hicks when they began to interrogate him in a Northern Alliance prison in Mazar-e-Sharif, Afghanistan, in December 2001.

First, the "white boy" was tied up, both hands and feet.

Then the beating started, according to a Taliban supporter who was Hicks's cellmate in Afghanistan and in the US military prison in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Hicks was bashed at least three times in two-hour sessions by soldiers using bare fists.

Shah Mohammed, 22, was released last year after spending three months in a cell next to Hicks in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

Speaking at his home in the Pakistani village of Alla Dand Dheri this week, Shah said he remembered well seeing Hicks being beaten. His revelations came as the first US soldier court-martialled over prisoner abuse in Iraq pleaded guilty.

Shah was one of hundreds of Taliban prisoners who were subjected to similar brutal interrogation sessions in the Northern Alliance-run prison.

Inside the prison, he noticed there was one detainee the American interrogators were particularly angry about.

The detainee was Hicks, the Australian who had joined the Taliban forces and been captured at a Northern Alliance checkpoint.

Although there is not evidence Hicks was mistreated in Guantanamo Bay, what Shah saw in the interrogation rooms at Mazar-e-Sharif appears to contradict claims made by Foreign Minister Alexander Downer that there was no evidence that Hicks had been mistreated during his time in US captivity.

A spokesman for Mr Downer said yesterday the US had provided assurances Hicks had not been mistreated while in US custody, not only while in Guantanamo Bay.

The spokesman said if there were new allegations that Hicks had been mistreated, the Government would examine them.

But so far, he said, no evidence had been produced and Hicks had not made any complaint when visited again by Australian consular officials last week. Unlike Hicks, Shah is able to speak about his experiences. The 22-year-old baker was released back to Pakistan last year after being classified as posing "no threat to the United States military and its interests in Afghanistan and Pakistan".

His village is about 320km north of Islamabad, in Pakistan's remote North West Frontier Province.

Set at the base of steep rocky hills on the banks of a picturesque mountain stream, the village seems a long way from the terror of the Mazar-e-Sharif prison and the wire cages of Guantanamo Bay. But Shah's memory of his own incarceration and what happened to fellow inmates such as Hicks is only too clear.

Speaking this week in his uncle's spartan but neatly kept living room, he told of clearly seeing Hicks being taken away and beaten during interrogation sessions in prison at Mazar-e-Sharif.

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF STATE

REVIEW AUTHORITY: HARRY R MELONE

DATE/CASE ID: 30 NOV 2004 200303827

<http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/printpage/0594096146>

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"He (Hicks) was very angry about the Americans capturing innocent people," Shah said, speaking through an interpreter.

But the Americans were also angry. "He was beaten," Shah said.

"They were saying to him, did you meet Osama (bin Laden), what was your relationship with this or that Taliban figure.

"The other detainees would be tied up with rope on one hand and one foot, but Hicks they tied up both hands and both feet."

Shah said it was because Hicks was a "white boy".

"There were three two-hour sessions. They used their fists. Three or four Americans in uniform," he said.

"The Northern Alliance would come and get the prisoners and go and give them to the Americans. Then the Americans would hand them back to the Northern Alliance to put them back into their cells."

Shah said he knew the beatings were going on because he could see through a window into one of the interrogation rooms.

He said the Americans filmed the beatings and the interrogations.

His comments raise questions about the claims that Australian officials are not aware of any evidence of Hicks being mistreated during his captivity.

"If people are going to make allegations against other people of human rights abuses, they need to come up with the evidence," Mr Oowner told journalists on Monday.

"They need to come up with the evidence, not just smear people and suggest that something appalling has happened without providing the evidence."

Shah said he was willing to travel to Australia to give that evidence, although he was worried about how he might be treated.

Hicks's Adelaide lawyer, Stephen Kenny, said yesterday that allegations of abuse against enemy combatants were now "so overwhelming" that there needed to be a "full and proper" inquiry into the treatment of prisoners in Afghanistan and Guantanamo Bay.

"It is absolutely vital now that the Australian Government immediately demand copies of that video and that they be made public so that people can see the truth of these matters," Mr Kenny said.

Mr Kenny said he was seeking instructions from Mr Hicks to confirm his co-operation in any "properly instituted" inquiry into abuse of terror suspects arrested in Afghanistan.

Mr Kenny first raised allegations last week that Mr Hicks was abused, but is constrained from detailing specific incidents.

"I can confirm that David Hicks told me on the very first occasion I saw him of a number of allegations of mistreatment towards himself and other prisoners, the details of which I cannot reveal."

Mr Shah still has his own demons to deal with, however.

He said he did not fight and was only a simple baker who made bread for the Taliban.

He was captured by villagers and sold to the Northern Alliance for \$5000 after the fall of the Taliban.

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His interrogation occurred under similar conditions to that of Mr Hicks in the crowded prison and interrogation centre.

He said that during the three months he spent in a cell beside Mr Hicks in Guantanamo Bay, he did not see the Australian suffer any obvious brutality.

But he said he himself was regularly drugged -- treatment that left him mentally unstable and prompted him to try to kill himself.

Mr Hicks, however, appeared to be co-operating with the guards, Mr Shah said.

"He would make friends with them. They would come and chat and say 'why did you go to Afghanistan?' It was another form of interrogation."

Mr Shah laughed, however, at suggestions from other released prisoners that Mr Hicks had abandoned Islam during his lengthy incarceration in Camp X-Ray. "He was a good Muslim," he said.

Mr Hicks would spend his days praying, reading the Koran and exercising.

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