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'Platinum' captives held at off-limits Gitmo camp



International Committee of the Red Cross

Ammar al Baluchi, nephew of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and a self proclaimed Microsoft trained software engineer, posed in a similar fashion to his uncle, preparing for prayer ahead of Ramadan, in Camp 7, the secret detention center at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, set aside for former CIA detainees. The image offers a rare look inside the prison camp run by a clandestine military team called Task Force Platinum.

GUANTANAMO BAY NAVY BASE, Cuba --
Call them the platinum prisoners.

Somewhere on this isolated outpost, strictly off-limits from the Pentagon's media tour, is a secret prison camp housing 15 alleged senior al Qaeda captives called "high-value detainees." It is Camp 7, and run by a special unit code-named Task Force Platinum.

Khalid Sheik Mohammed, called KSM, is here. He's the alleged al Qaeda kingpin whom the CIA this week confirmed it covertly waterboarded somewhere overseas to break his will, using a technique that simulates drowning and is widely condemned as torture.

Six months after he got here, transcripts show, KSM confessed to plotting a virtual, global campaign of terror -- everything from the Sept. 11 assaults on New York and the Pentagon to the never-realized assassinations of American presidents.

Also here is Majid Khan, a 27-year-old suburban Baltimore high school graduate who KSM allegedly asked to research one unrealized plot. Khan told a military panel that he was so desperate in his earliest months here that he gnawed at the artery in

his arm, wanting to die.

Who runs this camp? Who built it? How does it function? Who comes and goes and gets to talk the detainees? When and how will they see lawyers?

Some of these questions will be front and center at the Military Commissions Thursday in the case of Salim Hamdan of Yemen -- Osama bin Laden's driver, whom the Pentagon says is a war criminal.

His charge sheets allege he conspired with the top leadership of al Qaeda's campaign of terror -- from the Sept. 11 attacks to the suicide bombings of the USS Cole in October 2000 in Aden, Yemen.

Hamdan's lawyers are in a struggle with the prosecution over access to the captives of Camp 7, who arrived at this remote base in September 2006 after years of secret CIA interrogation.

And they want the judge, Navy Capt. Keith Allred, to resolve the dispute.

The lawyers want to ask seven of the men -- who may someday face the war court themselves -- what they know about the wiry \$200-a-month driver who has claimed for years that he was a working stiff, not a terrorist.

"Maybe you sit down with Khalid Sheik Mohammed and he says, 'I had nothing to do with 9/11. I was waterboarded. I was a driver in Pakistan and nothing to do with it,' " says Navy Lt. Cmdr Brian Mizer, Hamdan's Defense Department appointed lead lawyer.

"But some of these guys may be proud of what they've done and will tell us what they know: Who is Hamdan, how does he fit into the al Qaeda puzzle."

The military has so far denied the request, citing national security reasons. If they talk to outsiders, the argument goes, al Qaeda's inner circle could spill U.S. intelligence secrets, including how the CIA held and interrogated them and tip off other terrorists.

Hamdan's team argues that a core of the alleged al Qaeda brain trust is just a jeep ride away from the war court.

Only once Mizer has questioned them -- likely shackled and chained to the floor, like any other captive-lawyer meeting -- can the defense decide whether any might serve as a character witness at a trial before U.S. military officers.

No reporter has seen Camp 7 on the weekly tours for U.S. and foreign media that showcase a U.S. program of "safe and humane detention" while the Pentagon decides whether to try them at "full, fair and open" trials.

"Quite frankly, for security reasons and policies that come down from the Secretary of Defense, we cannot divulge the location of where it is," said Army Lt. Col. Ed Bush, a prison camps spokesman on Tuesday's media tour.

Camp 7 separates the 15 men from the 262 others, who have found ingenious ways of communicating during five-plus years here.

Tuesday, for example, Camp 5 captives announced the arrival of the weekly media tour by

banging on their cells' steel doors and calling to each other in Arabic that "madaneyeen," or civilians, were on the cellblocks.

In contrast, the only two attorneys to see a Camp 7 captive say he has only been able to communicate with one other detainee -- at a recreation time they have shared throughout their confinement.

Even Hamdan's case prosecutor has told the case judge that he doesn't have the necessary clearances to meet with high-value detainees.

Army Col. Larry Morris, the current chief commissions prosecutor, told reporters Wednesday morning that his side hasn't yet ruled out granting permission to Mizer -- who does have top-secret security clearance -- to talk to them.

For his part, Mizer has said he doesn't want to publicize what the United States did to the men. His clearances only allow him to ask questions -- not reveal the answers.

So far, only Wells Dixon and Gita Gutierrez, staff attorneys at the New York Center for Constitutional Rights, have seen a Camp 7 captive -- Khan, a 1999 graduate of Owings Mills High School in Maryland.

And only a few details of their meetings survived the censor's ink, notably the name of their prison compound, Camp 7, and that the young man has only spoken with one other high-value detainee here -- another captive the CIA admitted waterboarding, Abu Zubaydah.

Neither Khan nor Abu Zubaydah are among the seven men Hamdan's lawyers seek to question in the case, which reconvenes Thursday for hearings ahead of a May trial when the Pentagon will assemble military officers from around the world to sit in judgment of Osama bin Laden's driver.