

Editorial

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"They told me six years ago that I was cleared to leave and return and here I am still"

Shaker Aamer still remembers thinking "I'm saved!" when the Americans picked him up as he fled war-torn Afghanistan for Pakistan.

That was more than 11 years ago. Today he remains where he has been since February 2002, incarcerated in the prison camp at Guantanamo, having confessed – under duress, he says – to membership of the al-Qa'ida network in the UK and to having had ties to Osama bin Laden. He is the only British citizen or resident still there out of 16; one of 166 inmates of a prison that Barack Obama once called a blot on America's name and which he promised to close within a year of taking office, by January 2009.

Aamer, almost 70 days into a hunger strike born out of despair, writes in a letter, which we publish, that he fears he may die before reaching a trial to confront the charges made against him, which he contests. The hunger strike, he says: "Is about the fact that they told me six years ago that I was cleared to leave and return to my wife and four children, but here I am, still in the Guantanamo." He adds: "It's about the man in the cell block with me who is in a wheelchair, or would be if they had not taken it from him as a punishment for striking. It's about the man who got so desperate that he tried to kill himself – so they patched him up and put him in Camp V Echo, the inner ring of this hell."

Congress may be the main culprit for this shameful state of affairs, having blocked every initiative on Guantanamo. But President Obama's record on this issue has also been wretched. The White House has shuffled the camp to the bottom of the pile as a priority and forgotten it, which is why the increasingly hopeless prisoners have resorted to a hunger strike in a bid to attract attention. Why the Americans will not let Aamer go, in spite of having cleared him for release twice, is a mystery. But the unaccountable delays, stretching from one year to the next, naturally feed suspicions that they fear he has too much to tell about what he has witnessed in

the camp during the past decade.

Our government has been equally fork-tongued. The Foreign Office maintains it has always wanted to see Aamer returned to the UK to stand trial. But there is clearly no real urgency about getting Aamer back to Britain, which is doubtless connected to the fact he insists he was tortured in Afghanistan in the presence of a British MI6 officer and that our government is thus at some level complicit in what he claims he has undergone. Were he to come back to Britain, he might provide embarrassing testimony to Scotland Yard's investigation into allegations of British complicity in torture following the 9/11 attacks. According to his legal team, far from wanting to get him back to the UK, British Intelligence, along with their US counterparts, are arranging for Aamer to be released at some point to a third country, his birthplace of Saudi Arabia, where, all too conveniently, he would probably face arrest.

Whether the hunger strikers will succeed in their gamble to return the spotlight to Guantanamo is unclear. In Washington, there seems to be no conscience to jog. The camp's 10th anniversary came and went last year without much notice. Every new terrorist attack, like the bombings in Boston, cements the American right in its conviction that terrorists, proven or not – the accusation appears to be enough – don't need the luxury of courts and are best kept out of sight and out of mind.

Shaker Aamer says his favourite read in prison is Orwell's 1984. The term "Orwellian" is often abused and applied to people suffering relatively minor inconveniences. Sadly, in this case, the comparison is all too apt.