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## Al-Jazeera Cameraman Still at Guantanamo

Friday February 23, 2007 6:01 PM

AP Photo NYET734

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6:46 pm

GUANTANAMO BAY NAVAL BASE, Cuba (AP) - A TV cameraman is getting an inside view of life at Guantanamo Bay prison - only he is unable to get out and tell the story.

Sami al-Hajj, of the Al-Jazeera TV network, was stopped at the Afghanistan border by Pakistani authorities in December 2001, turned over to U.S. forces and hauled in chains six months later to Guantanamo, where about 390 men are held on suspicion of links to al-Qaida or the Taliban.

Al-Hajj, a 38-year-old native of Sudan, has been held in this U.S. military prison ever since.

He is believed to be the only journalist from a major international news organization held at Guantanamo.

Colleagues from al-Hajj's Qatar-based network and the Sudanese government want to know why he is being held, but the U.S. government is saying little. The military did not even publicly acknowledge holding al-Hajj until last April, when it released a list of Guantanamo detainees in response to a Freedom of Information Act request filed by The Associated Press.

But military documents sketch at least a partial outline of al-Hajj's experiences at Guantanamo and the U.S. grounds for holding him - that he transported money between 1996 and 2000 for a defunct charity that allegedly provided money to militant groups, and that he met a "senior al-Qaida lieutenant."

When he appeared before a military review panel at this remote U.S. military base in August 2005, al-Hajj, citing the advice of his attorney, declined to respond to questions. But he denied any connection to terrorism.

"With all due respect, a mistake has been made because I have never been a member of any terrorist group," he said, according to a transcript released the following year. "I can say without hesitation that I am not a threat to the United States."

From the Associated Press

During the hearing, aimed at determining whether al-Hajj posed a threat to the United States or possessed intelligence value, al-Hajj wore a white jumpsuit reserved for the "most compliant" detainees. An officer told the tribunal that al-Hajj was leading Islamic prayer sessions and teaching other prisoners English.

His colleagues at Al-Jazeera claim his detention is American harassment of an Arabic TV network whose coverage has long angered U.S. officials. Near the entrance to the network's Khartoum bureau a banner saying "Free Sami al-Hajj" hangs alongside his photo.

"He's our colleague, so we're very worried," Nassef Salah Eldin, an Al-Jazeera producer in the Sudanese capital. "We feel it could happen to any of us."

Lamis Andoni, a Middle East analyst for the network who helped organize a campaign for al-Hajj's release, noted the network's sour relationship with the American government. In April 2003, an Al-Jazeera journalist was killed when the network's Baghdad bureau was struck during a U.S. bombing campaign. In November 2001, a U.S. missile destroyed Al-Jazeera's office in Kabul, Afghanistan. The U.S. claims both attacks were mistakes.

"When you are targeted once, it could be a mistake," Andoni said in an interview from Amman, Jordan. "But when you are bombed twice, it's something else."

In an interview in Khartoum, Sudanese Justice Minister Mohamed Ali al-Mardi said the holding of the cameraman without charge "is repugnant to all the conventions and principles of international law."

Washington has given Sudan no information about al-Hajj, al-Mardi said. U.S. relations with Sudan are strained over the Darfur conflict.

Al-Hajj has been interrogated at the Guantanamo Bay prison complex, which sits on an arid corner of southeast Cuba overlooking the Caribbean.

"I consider the information that we obtained from him to be useful," Paul Rester, director of the Joint Intelligence Group at the prison, said in an interview at Guantanamo Bay. Rester refused to elaborate or even to comment on the allegations aired at the 2005 hearing.

International human rights and press freedom groups condemn al-Hajj's imprisonment. Reporters Without Borders cited his case when it dropped the United States nine places to 53rd in its 2006 Worldwide Press Freedom Index. The group also noted the case of AP photographer Bilal Hussein, detained by U.S. forces on April 12 in Ramadi, Iraq, and held without charge ever since.

Al-Hajj himself has protested by joining the hunger strike at Guantanamo, according to letters released by his lawyer, Clive Stafford Smith.

"If justice is to be achieved, due sacrifice must be made," al-Hajj wrote.

It was not known whether al-Hajj was among the 11 prisoners that the military said were on hunger strike as of Thursday.

The U.S. military says that in the 1990s, al-Hajj was an executive assistant at a Qatar-based beverage company

that provided support to Muslim fighters in Bosnia and Chechnya. The U.S. says he also traveled to Azerbaijan at least eight times to carry money on behalf of his employer to the Al-Haramain Islamic Foundation, a now defunct charity that authorities say funded militant groups.

It was also during this period that he allegedly "met" Mamdouh Mahmud Salim, a senior lieutenant to Osama bin Laden who was arrested in Germany in 1998 and extradited to the United States.

Stafford Smith said al-Hajj did not routinely transport money but that he and his wife once carried \$220,000 from Qatar to Azerbaijan for his boss at the beverage company - and that he even declared the cash to customs.

"Sami was only doing what he was told by his boss," Stafford Smith said.

He said al-Hajj, while working for the beverage company, met Salim only once, when he was sent to pick him up at the airport in Qatar in 1998. During the drive, the two discussed schools and housing, the attorney said.

Al-Hajj, who has a wife and son in Qatar, will mark his fifth anniversary in Guantanamo in June. The military informed him in December that it had reviewed his case and determined he was not among the more than 80 detainees at Guantanamo Bay deemed eligible for release or transfer.

"You will continue to be kept at Guantanamo Bay for at least one more year," the military told al-Hajj in the formal notice.

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Ben Fox reported for this story from Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and Alfred de Montesquiou from Khartoum, Sudan.

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