

Beat: News

Algerian man freed from Guantanamo Bay after 12 years without charge

-, 14.03.2014, 20:00 Time

USPA News - An Algerian detainee has been released from the Guantanamo Bay detention facility in Cuba after being held in detention for more than a decade without charge, the Pentagon said on Thursday, lowering the number of remaining detainees to 154. Ahmed Belbacha was arrested by Pakistani authorities in December 2001 and handed over to the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) the following month, after which he was held at Guantanamo Bay for 12 years without ever being charged or tried for a crime. While detained, his lawyers claimed Belbacha faced "violent interrogation, physical abuse and incommunicado detention" by U.S. authorities. Belbacha was an accountant at the Algerian state-run oil company Sonatrach before being captured.

He was also a part of the national army and took his family to the United Kingdom to request political asylum after facing threats from local militant groups in the wake of Algeria's civil war. However, according to a classified 2006 military file, released by the whistle-blowing website WikiLeaks, Belbacha watched Jihad recruitment videos while in the United Kingdom and traveled to Afghanistan in mid-2001 after his request for political asylum was rejected by the British government. He stayed at an Algerian guesthouse in Jalalabad where the U.S. claimed he had received small arms training. In November 2001, after the attacks on the United States two months earlier, Belbacha fled to the Tora Bora mountains due to the impending attacks on the region by coalition forces. He hid in caves for approximately 20 days before fleeing to Pakistan, where he and his group of about 100 people asked villagers for help to contact the Pakistani government for refugee assistance. Instead, the villagers led the group to a military unit which took them into custody. After more than a decade imprisoned without charge, Belbacha was approved for release by unanimous consent of the interagency Guantanamo Review Task Force, which conducted a comprehensive review of his case as ordered by U.S. President Barack Obama in January 2009 with the aim of eventually closing the facility. "In the 12 years of his detention, he was never charged or tried for any crime, and in-depth reviews of his case carried out by the Bush and Obama administrations both concluded that Ahmed was not dangerous and knew nothing about terrorism," said human rights group Reprieve, whose lawyers represented Belbacha. According to Reprieve, the Algerian authorities have pledged to make sure that Belbacha will be returning to his family as soon as possible and will be "treated fairly and humanely on his return home." His main concern now consists of seeing his "deeply worried and confused" parents as well as to help and look after his brothers. His grandmother died while in detention at Guantanamo Bay. Polly Rossdale, Deputy Director of the Guantanamo team at Reprieve, welcomed recent efforts to free Guantanamo Bay prisoners who have not been charged but noted how easy it was for the United States to detain someone without any real evidence of terrorism for over a decade. "We applaud the efforts now being made - however late they come - to right some small portion of this wrong, and get prisoners home who should never have been forced to endure such a nightmare in the first place," she said. The detention facility was opened in 2002 in the wake of the September 11, 2001, attacks and remains open despite Obama ordering it to be closed within 12 months on January 22, 2009. And while 154 people remain imprisoned nearly five years later, only a handful of them are facing charges. Obama pledged last year to renew his efforts to close the detention facility, saying Guantanamo Bay is not necessary to keep Americans safe. "The idea that we would still maintain forever a group of individuals who have not been tried, that is contrary to who we are, it is contrary to our interests, and it needs to stop," he said on April 30, 2013. "Congress determined that they would not let us close it," he added at the time, pointing to congressional restrictions on the transfer of prisoners from the Guantanamo Bay as an obstacle to close the prison. Observers, however, note that Obama himself has repeatedly signed such restrictions into law. At least 15 detainees are believed to remain on a hunger strike, down from 106 inmates last this year, resulting in the military force-feeding all of them, which is contrary to international standards. The Pentagon stopped providing daily updates on the hunger strike in December, saying the figures serve no operational purpose and "detract from the more important issues."

Article online:

<https://www.uspa24.com/bericht-1998/algerian-man-freed-from-guantanamo-bay-after-12-years-without-charge.html>

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