

Guantanamo's Hidden History

Shocking statistics of starvation

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CAGEPRISONERS

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INTRODUCTION

Today is the [third anniversary](#) of the deaths in Guantánamo of three prisoners, Ali al-Salami, Mani al-Utaybi and Yasser al-Zahrani. The anniversary comes just two weeks after the second anniversary of the death of [Abdul Rahman al-Amri](#), the fourth prisoner to die in mysterious circumstances, and just eight days after the death of a fifth prisoner, [Muhammad Salih](#). The authorities maintain that the men died by committing suicide, although doubts about this explanation have repeatedly been voiced by former prisoners. However, it is also significant that all five men were long-term hunger strikers.

Cageprisoners is marking this sad anniversary with a brief report about the Guantánamo hunger strikers, and the dreadful toll that prolonged starvation -- and brutal force-feeding, which is the response of the US military -- exacts on prisoners held, for the most part, without charge or trial in a seemingly endless legal limbo. Force-feeding involves prisoners being strapped into a restraint chair and force-fed twice daily against their will, through an agonizing process that involves having a tube inserted into the stomach through the nose.

As Clive Stafford Smith, the lawyer for several dozen Guantánamo prisoners, explained in the [Los Angeles Times](#) in 2007, with reference to [Sami al-Haj](#), who was released in May 2008, "Medical ethics tell us that you cannot force-feed a mentally competent hunger striker, as he has the right to complain about his mistreatment, even unto death. But the Pentagon knows that a prisoner starving himself to death would be abysmal PR, so they force-feed Sami. As if that were not enough, when Gen. Bantz J. Craddock headed up the US Southern Command, he announced that soldiers had started making hunger strikes less 'convenient.' Rather than leave a feeding tube in place, they insert and remove it twice a day."

Statistics can be deceiving, of course, but three months ago, when Ramzi Kassem, the lawyer for [Ahmed Zuhair](#), one of Guantánamo's most persistent hunger strikers, came back from a recent visit to the prison, he estimated that Zuhair weighed no more than 100 pounds, and "also appeared to be ill, vomiting repeatedly during meetings" at the prison. "Mr. Zuhair lifted his orange shirt and showed me his chest," Kassem explained. "It was skeletal." He added, "Mr. Zuhair's legs looked like bones with skin wrapped tight around them."

While this is disturbingly thin, given that an average, healthy man weights between 150 and 200 pounds, Cageprisoners' latest report only confirms that it is typical of the skeletal state of Guantánamo's long-term hunger strikers.

In March 2007, the Pentagon released [a series of documents](#), "Measurements of Heights and Weights of Individuals Detained by the Department of Defense at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba," which recorded, in numbing detail, the prisoners' weights, from the date of their arrival and, in general, at monthly intervals thereafter until December 2006, when these particular records come to an end.

In the cases of prisoners on hunger strike, the weights were recorded at weekly intervals, and, in some cases, on a daily basis.

Unnoticed at the time of their release, these documents have not, until now, been analyzed in depth, but after conducting a comprehensive review of the documents I can reveal that the results demonstrate the extent to which the Pentagon's prohibition on releasing any photos of the prisoners has enabled it to disguise a truly shocking fact: throughout Guantánamo's history, one in ten of the total population -- 80 prisoners in total -- has, at some point, weighed less than 112 pounds (eight stone, or 50 kg), and 20 of these prisoners have weighed less than 98 pounds (seven stone, or 44 kg).

If photos of these prisoners had been made available, it is, I believe, no understatement to say that calls for Guantánamo's closure would have been much more strident than they have been, and as dozens of prisoners are still on hunger strike, the fear is that, unless President Obama steps up his efforts to close Guantánamo before his January 2010 deadline, more will follow.

Andy Worthington
For Cageprisoners
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Guantánamo's Hidden History: Shocking Statistics of Starvation

A list of 80 Guantánamo prisoners who, at various times between January 2002 and February 2007, weighed less than 112 pounds (eight stone, or 50 kg), including 20 prisoners who weighed less than 98 pounds (seven stone, or 44 kg)

ISN	Status	Name	Country	Weight on arrival (lbs)	Lowest weight (lbs)	Date of lowest weight
005	Released	Abdul Aziz al-Matrafi	Saudi	121	110	Jul 03
008	Released	Abdullah Rasoul	Afghan	114	103	Sep 05
027		Othman Mohammed	Yemen	117	98	Mar/Apr 05
034		Abdullah al-Yafi	Yemen	165	109	Sep 05
042		Abdul Rahman Shalabi	Saudi	124	100	Nov 05
049		Assem al-Aasmi	Saudi	144	96	Sep 03
050	Released	Zayd al-Ghamdi	Saudi	144	98	Mar 04
062	Released	Mohammed al-Juhani	Saudi	114	103	Jan 03
063		Mohammed al-Qahtani	Saudi	132	106	Sep 02
068	Released	Khalid al-Bawardi	Yemen	117	108	Jul 04
075	Released	Najib Lahcini	Morocco	125	100	Dec 05
078	DIED	Muhammad Salih	Yemen	124	86	Dec 05
081	Released	Walid Ali	Sudan	117	107	Feb 04
088		Adham Ali Aawad	Yemen	102	93	Aug 05
093	DIED	Yasser al-Zahrani	Saudi	118	87	Jan 06
108	Released	Abdul Rauf Aliza	Afghan	142	107	Dec 03
114	Released	Yousef al-Shehri	Saudi	141	97	Jul 05/Jan 06
115		Abdul Rahman Nasser	Yemen	116	104	Nov 02
121	Released	Salman Mohammed	Saudi	112	102	Sep/Oct 05
122	Released	Bijad al-Atabi	Saudi	135	109	Sep 05
123	Released	Mohammed Hassan	Morocco	124	101	Oct 05
129	Released	Toufig al-Marwai	Yemen	126	106	Dec 03
130	Released	Faha Sultan	Saudi	150	109	Aug 06
132	Released	Abdul Salam al-Shehri	Saudi	165	105	May/Jun 05
136	Released	Tarik Mohammed	Pakistan	116	95	Feb 03
151	Released	Mubarak Hashem	Bangladesh	97	100	Oct 02/Dec 04
154	Released	Mazin al-Awfi	Saudi	114	104	Jan 06
156		Adnan Farhan Latif	Yemen	114	103	Jun 06
158	Released	Majid al-Harbi	Saudi	161	93	Dec 05
167		Ali al-Raimi	Yemen	130	100	Jun 03
171		Abu Bakr Alahdal	Yemen	99	81	Oct 05
178		Tarek Baada	Yemen	121	94	Jan 06
182	Released	Bandar al-Jabri	Saudi	116	111	Apr 06
187	Released	Murtadha Magram	Saudi	142	87	Jan 06
191	Released	Saleh al-Khatami	Saudi	134	106	Oct 02
194	Released	Mohammed al-Rimi	Libya	143	104	Jul 04
199	DIED	Abdul Rahman al-Amri	Saudi	150	88	Nov 05
207	Released	Mishal al-Harbi	Saudi	116	98	May 03
221	Released	Ali Mohsen Salih	Yemen	139	107	Dec 05
232		Fawzi al-Odah	Kuwait	139	107	Aug 05
233		Abdul Salih	Yemen	160	110	Dec 05/Jan 06
248	Released	Saleh al-Oshan	Saudi	106	106	Jul 04
249		Mohammed al-Hamiri	Yemen	122	102	Feb 03
251		Mohammed bin Salem	Yemen	117	105	Jan 04
288		Motai Saib	Algeria	104	90	Oct 02

304	Released	Mohammed Ansar	Pakistan	107	104	Nov 02
305	Released	Hanif Mohammed	Pakistan	181	111	Nov 02
309		Muieen Abdul Sattar	UAE	123	111	Nov 02
321		Ahmed Kuman	Yemen	115	91	Jan 04
334	Released	Jarallah al-Marri	Qatar	122	105	Jul 05
346	Released	Said al-Shaibrani	Saudi	132	101	Dec 05
356	Released	Abdul Razaq	Afghan	102	102	May 02
365	Released	Sabit Layar	Afghan	115	96	Nov 02
434		Mustafa al-Shamyri	Yemen	137	109	Jul 04
440		Mohammed Bawazir	Yemen	126	100	Jan 06
444	Released	Jihan Wali	Pakistan	116	87	Nov 02
498		Mohammed Haidel	Yemen	105	90	Nov 02
569		Zohair al-Shorabi	Yemen	128	110	Apr 03
575		Saad al-Azani	Yemen	122	106	Jan 04
588	DIED	Mani al-Utaybi	Saudi	114	89	Sep/Oct 05
649	Released	Mushtaq Ali Patel	France	89	76	Nov 02
669		Ahmed Zuhair	Saudi	149	104	Nov 05
678	Released	Fawaz Mahdi	Yemen	113	110	Jan/Feb 03
680		Emad Hassan	Yemen	113	85	Dec 05
682		Ghassan al-Sharbi	Saudi	150	100	Nov 05
683		Fayad Ahmed	Yemen	116	98	Feb/Mar 03
687		Abdul Aziz al-Noofayee	Saudi	123	92	Jun 05
706	Released	Mohammed al-Amin	Mauritania	121	103	Nov 05
836		Ayoub Saleh	Yemen	106	109	Oct 04
837		Bashir al-Marwalah	Yemen	97	107	Nov 04
842	Released	Sultan Ahmad	Pakistan	120	106	Apr 04
888	Released	Ismatullah	Afghan	119	100	Apr 05
944		Sharifullah	Afghan	115	105	Jul 03
1030		Abdul Hafiz	Afghan	152	104	May 05
1056	Released	Said Mohammed	Afghan	122	103	Dec 03
1457		Abdu Ali Sharqawi	Yemen	118	100	Sep 06
10005	Released	Lakhdar Boumediene	Algeria	156	110	Nov 02/Jan 03
10011		Mustafa al-Hawsawi	Saudi	100	99	Feb 07
10017		Abu Faraj al-Libi	Libya	98	101	Dec 06

The figures in this report -- which looks at the weight records of 40 released prisoners, 36 who are still held, and four who have died -- are taken from "Measurements of Heights and Weights of Individuals Detained by the Department of Defense at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba," [released by the Pentagon](#) in March 2007.

This study is not an exact science, as the records contain some figures that do not appear to be reliable -- sudden and dramatic fluctuations in weight over a very short period of time, for example -- but I have removed those that seem to be particularly untrustworthy, and am confident that the figures used are as accurate as possible. Note that in cases where the prisoners' lowest weights are closely related to their weight on arrival, they had all put on weight before losing it again.

It should be noted, however, that this report deals only with extremely thin prisoners, whose state must have particularly endangered their health, and does

not include numerous other prisoners who lost 25 to 30 percent of their body weight through hunger strikes, but who weighed more on arrival.

One example is Ali al-Salami, one of the three prisoners who died in June 2006. Al-Salami weighed 172 pounds on arrival at Guantánamo, but at one point, while being force-fed daily, over a five-month period that lasted from 11 January 2006 until 6 June 2006, just four days before his death, his weight dropped to 120 pounds.

From almost the moment that Camp X-Ray opened, prisoners embarked on hunger strikes as the only means available to protest about the conditions of their detention: specifically, their day-to-day treatment, the treatment of the Koran, and the crushing uncertainty of their fate, as they remained imprisoned without charge and without trial, with the ever-present possibility that they would be held for the rest of their lives.

According to several sources, including "The Guantánamo Prisoner Hunger Strikes & Protests: February 2002 - August 2005" ([PDF](#)), a report compiled by the Center for Constitutional Rights in September 2005, several short hunger strikes took place in the earliest days of Camp X-Ray, in response to a guard stamping on the Koran, but the first large-scale hunger strike, involving 194 prisoners, began on 27 February 2002 -- and continued until 10 May -- after an MP removed a home-made turban from a prisoner while he was praying. As the strike progressed, it became a protest against the prisoners' indefinite detention and their harsh living conditions, and by mid-March, when three strikers were forcibly given intravenous fluids, military officials acknowledged that the prisoners were protesting "the fact that they don't know what is happening to them," and were particularly concerned about "their murky future."

Although none of the prisoners in this report suffered acute weight loss at this time (the only prisoner cited, Abdul Razak, was a severely disturbed schizophrenic, who was sent back to Afghanistan in May 2002), 13 prisoners dropped to their lowest weight during a second mass hunger strike in October and November 2002.

Released British prisoner Tarek Dergoul reported that another strike -- again prompted by mistreatment of the Koran -- began in December and continued for six weeks, in which "People were fainting left, right and centre." Two prisoners reached their lowest weights at this period, but others -- another 12 in 2003 and 12 in 2004 -- do not seem to have been related to mass protests, and were, instead, either individual or small-scale protests, or, in some cases, a reflection of illness, either mental, physical, or both.

30 of the lowest weight figures relate to the largest mass hunger strike at Guantánamo, which involved somewhere between 140 and 200 prisoners. Based on a manifesto, which called for "no violence, by hand or even words, to anyone, including guards," and declared that the protest was "a peaceful, non-

violent strike until demands are met," this involved the prisoners demanding religious respect, fair trials, proper food and clean water, the right to see sunlight, "real, effective medical treatment," the right not to have correspondence withheld, an end to the "levels" of privileges introduced by Maj. Gen. Geoffrey Miller, the commander of the camp from 2002 to 2004, and the appointment of a neutral body to oversee conditions at Guantánamo.

This strike began in the summer of 2005, and lasted until January 2006, when the restraint chairs were introduced. As a result, the number of hunger strikers fell from a total of 41, on December 15, to just five, with three of the five -- including [Ahmed Zuhair](#), who has now been on a hunger strike for four years -- being force-fed.

Disturbingly, the records also show that the three men who [died in June 2006](#) were also force-fed at this time: Ali al-Salami (mentioned above), Yasser al-Zahrani, who was weighed on a daily basis from October 2005 until 18 January 2006, and Mani al-Utaybi, who was weighed regularly from August to October 2005. Al-Utaybi was then weighed daily from 24 December 2005 to 6 February 2006, and was also weighed daily from 30 May to 6 June, just four days before his death.

A year later, Zuhair and two other long-term hunger strikers -- Abdul Rahman Shalabi and Tarek Baada -- were still refusing to eat, and were still being subjected to the twice-daily insertion of the tubes into their stomachs, according to [a report](#) by [Sami al-Haj](#) (the al-Jazeera cameraman released in May 2008), who had, by this point, embarked on a hunger strike himself. Al-Haj also explained that, "at the end of January [2007] there were at least 42 people on hunger strike."

By this time, of course, the publicly available Pentagon weight records used to compile this report had come to an end, and although Sami's report cites several prisoners who are included here, it also mentions others who may, in the two and half years for which records are unavailable, also have suffered extreme weight loss. Given that [a hunger strike involving up to 50 prisoners](#) began on or around the seventh anniversary of the opening of Guantánamo, on 11 January this year, it seems probable, therefore, that at least some of these hunger strikers are, like Ahmed Zuhair, perilously thin and in grave danger, which is a grim thought on the third anniversary of the deaths of Ali al-Salami, Mani al-Utaybi and Yasser al-Zahrani.