

Close Guantanamo Now!

John Dear | Jun. 3, 2008 On the Road to Peace

I was in Washington, D.C. last week for the opening day of the trial of 35 friends and peacemakers who dared to protest the indefinite detention and torture of detainees at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. They did their best over several days to speak in court on behalf of those who never had a day in court.

Eventually, the judge dismissed the case of one defendant and found the rest guilty of misdemeanors. A dozen were sent to jail, for 1 to 15 days.

The trial stemmed from a demonstration at the Supreme Court Jan. 11, the sixth anniversary of the opening of the Guantanamo Bay U.S. detention and torture facility.

On the first day of the trial, early Tuesday morning, we gathered at the Supreme Court and from there we marched a few miles to the D.C. Superior Court.

Fifty of us wore orange jump suits and black hoods and others wore military fatigues. A large banner saying "Close Guantanamo" brought up the rear.

The procession was a quite a sight, yet drew little reaction. The one exception was from one choleric motorist. He moved slowly alongside and shouted at us. His anger was palpable. He seemed to embody the violence that has become a way of life for many Americans. "Get a job!" he yelled. "And take a shower, too!"

Once at the courthouse finally, we held a press conference. A torture survivor, along with human rights activists and several defendants, spoke outside the D.C. Superior Court. The torture survivor moved us with his rational plea. "Torture is wrong," he said. "Torture doesn't work. Torture is immoral. Torture is un-American."

The trial got underway, and the 35 defendants, some in orange, announced they would stand *pro se*, as their own lawyers. As they gave their names, each uttered the name of a Guantanamo prisoner. Prisoners' names buffeted judicial ears throughout the proceedings.

Said Matthew Daloisio of the New York Catholic Worker, "I stood at the Supreme Court on behalf of Yasser Al Zahrani, a 22 year old Yemeni man, arrested at the age of 17 and never charged or tried, who on June 10, 2006, apparently took his own life."

Addressing Judge Wendell Gardner, Matt said, "In the five months since our arrest, we have made it further in the criminal justice system than these men have in over six years."

Fr. Bill Pickard from Scranton, Pa., said: "I went to the Supreme Court to bring before the law the name of Faruq Ali Ahmed -- who claims he traveled to Afghanistan in 2001 simply to teach the Koran to children and that he has no affiliation with the Taliban or Al Qaeda. He cannot do it for himself, so I am called by my faith, my respect for the rule of law, and my conscience to do it for him."

Complementing the uttering of names was silence. Nearly half the defendants elected to remain silent -- this in solidarity with the voiceless prisoners of Guantanamo.

Also rendered voiceless was a witness for the 34 defendants. The judge deemed "irrelevant" and "unnecessary" testimony from Thomas Wilner, a lawyer representing Guantanamo detainees. The judge barred him from taking the stand.

According to human rights groups, the United States holds more than 20,000 people -- some say as many as 27,000 people -- in detention centers around the world. All are held without charge or with no trial scheduled or planned. How many have been tortured we do not know. But torture, illegal detention, and cover-ups have become standard operating procedure for the new American empire.

The defendants are part of a group called "Witness Against Torture," which protests the immoral U.S. policies of torture and demands the closing of Guantanamo and all secret U.S. prisons. Frida Berrigan, the group's spokesperson, said after the verdicts, "We're sad about the convictions, but we're happy, moved and humbled to bring the stories, names and identification of the men in Guantanamo into a court of law."

Hope permeated the forlorn air. And it was because of these good people, many of them Catholic Workers and Christians. They forfeited their freedom for those without civil liberties. They used their voices on behalf of those made silent. They turned a glare of shame on our imperial courts, where lady justice is stridently touted then grossly mocked.

As we join this campaign to abolish torture and Guantanamo, we not only serve the suffering prisoners, but we reclaim our humanity. Let's press the U.S. Supreme Court and the Congress to outlaw torture, close Guantanamo, abolish all secret prisons supposedly outside the realm of law and assert decisively the right of *habeas corpus*.

To learn more about the trial, the defendants and the movement to shut down Guantanamo, visit <http://www.witnesstorture.org/> [1].

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John's forthcoming autobiography, *A Persistent Peace*, will be published on Aug. 1. For excerpts and details, see: www.persistentpeace.com [4]. To order, go to www.amazon.com [5]

. This weekend, John will lead a retreat for Pax Christi New Mexico in Albuquerque, N.M. See: www.johndear.org [6] for details.

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