

A Tale of Two Prisoners

Yvonne Ridley

Yvonne Ridley is a freelance journalist. She contributed this article to the launch Conference of the European Network for Peace and Human Rights. Her book about her experiences in Afghanistan, In The Hands of the Taliban, is published by Robson Books (£6.99).

Let me tell you the tale of two Brits who were arrested in Afghanistan last year. It was a time when the country was in the grip of the Taliban, one of the most brutal regimes in the world according to George Bush and Tony Blair.

The first Briton was arrested for entering the country illegally, without a passport and visa. The second Briton was arrested and until this present day we still don't know what the charges are and so we must presume him innocent until proven guilty.

The first Briton was interrogated for six days by Taliban intelligence, held under house arrest in Jalalabad in an air-conditioned room with access to a flush toilet and shower facilities. By the fourth day the Taliban had mysteriously received a Western intelligence file revealing that the Briton held was in fact a spy. On the surface, the evidence looked extremely convincing, and would have meant the death penalty – may be an execution live on *Al-Jazeera* TV. The image would have produced excellent propaganda for Bush and silenced the anti-war movement.

After further investigations by a team of the most senior Taliban intelligence officers sent from Kabul to Jalalabad, the file was proven to be bogus, and thought to be the mischievous work of Western and Mossad intelligence.

However, the original charge of illegally entering the country remained. The prisoner, so far unharmed, was driven from Jalalabad to Kabul Prison and remained there for four more days.

After complaints about the cramped conditions, the Taliban removed the Brit to comfortable sleeping quarters used by their own soldiers. They were reminded of the Geneva Convention and again a private room was made available.

On the final night the prisoner was left frightened and terrified when more than 50 cruise missiles dropped on Kabul, courtesy of Britain and America. The next day, on October 8, the British prisoner feared the Taliban would

take revenge. But instead, this reviled regime released the accused on humanitarian grounds, waving a release form signed by Mullah Omar.

The other British prisoner was not so lucky. His captors tortured and beat him, bound and gagged him, and put him in cramped, insanitary conditions. When he was moved to his next prison he was shaved, gagged, blindfolded, masked and drugged before being tied in to the seat of an aircraft and flown halfway round the world to Cuba.

This Briton is now in the hands of the Americans. His name is Mr Abbasi. The first prisoner, Yvonne Ridley, was much luckier and thankfully, due to the courtesy and respect accorded me, I am free to write this story. I was fortunate. I was captured by the Taliban.

Judging by the treatment meted out to the Brit and other detainees one could be forgiven for believing they are the ones in the hands of an uncivilised, barbaric regime. Perhaps President George Bush and Prime Minister Tony Blair might want to ponder these three words - pot, kettle and black!

The Americans are losing the moral high ground by the illegal removal of these prisoners of war. I am not anti-American but they are supposed to be our friends and so, like good friends, we should be able to tell them the truth. They, in turn, should heed good advice from civilised friends, and not treat criticism as treacherous behaviour.

Bearing in mind that none of these men have yet been tried and convicted of anything, is it right to dress them in bright orange costumes, shackled, manacled, masked, blindfolded, hands put in adult mittens and their ears covered to muffle out any noise? Any civilised human being would have to say 'no'. The fact that these men have also been shaved is an affront to every Muslim in the world and appears to re-inforce George Bush's talk of a 'crusade'.

If Gandhi were still alive he would probably give a wry smile and recall the time he was asked what he thought about Western Civilisation. 'I think it would be a good idea,' he replied. The great man also said: 'I object to violence because when it appears to do good the good is only temporary. The evil it does is permanent.'

American politicians used to boast that their country's very foundations were based on law and freedom. Ben Franklin reinforced this view by saying: 'Any nation that sacrifices freedom for security deserves neither.' Great words from wise men. How sad they are little more than dust.

What is happening in the so-called Camp X-Ray in Cuba is an insult to the memory of the thousands of innocent people who died in the September 11 atrocities. It also sends out an open message to any hostile regime in the world over how to treat a prisoner from the West.

When I was released from my Afghan prison I was pilloried because I said the Taliban had treated me with 'courtesy and respect'. Journalists have a responsibility to expose lies and reveal the truth – even if the truth is sometimes difficult to accept. The truth which is unfolding from the open air cages of Guantanamo Bay is very, very difficult to accept . . . if you count yourself as civilised and humane.