

# Guantánamo: An Extraordinary Humanity

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Global Research, June 17, 2007

UN Observer 17 June 2007

Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#),  
[Terrorism](#)

*"First they came for the Jews and I did not speak out because I was not a Jew. Then they came for the Communists and I did not speak out because I was not a Communist. Then they came for the trade unionists and I did not speak out because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for me and there was no one left to speak out for me."* Pastor Martin Niemöller

The British government is, barely noticed, performing a sinister, potentially life threatening, legal slight of hand, regarding prisoners held without trial in Guantánamo Bay, uncharged with any crime, now cleared, after years of incarceration, for release.

Those who have fled their countries in fear of their lives, been granted leave to remain in Britain — refugee status the British government have now revoked, since they have been away from the country too long – in Guantánamo Bay. Therefore, they are in danger of being returned by the UK Authorities, to the countries from which they fled in terror. The (London) Independent, in an editorial (15th June 2007) calls this: "A shocking betrayal that shames our government".

On Friday, Annas, the ten year old son of Jordanian born Jamil el-Banna – who was arrested in the Gambia in 2002, where he had gone to set up a business with his friend Bishar Al Rawi – in a gut wrenching letter to the incoming Prime Minister, Gordon Brown – has begged him to return his father as a gift for Fathers' Day on Sunday. The letter reads, in part: "I hope you won't say that my dad was away from the country for over two years ... my dad was only out of the country because he was locked up over there ... Now my dad can leave .. we hope he can come back to us .. before Father's Day. Every year this day is very sad for us. I hope this year, this day will be the best of my life."

El-Banna's wife and five children are all British. Mr el-Banna was granted "indefinite leave to remain" in the UK in 2000, indicating that the authorities believed he had a well founded fear of persecution.

Bishar Al-Rawi, el-Banna's best friend, was released – and returned to Britain earlier this year. Seven other British residents are held in Guantánamo, in what their legal Counsel Zachary Katznelson of Reprieve\* describes as: "... hellish conditions .. brutal. All but one kept in constant isolation, living in six by eight foot cells, with no windows and unrelenting electric light. One has been on hunger strike for over a hundred days, tied down and force fed, twice a day" (a practice abandoned in Britain as beyond brutal at the turn of the 20th century and the suffragette movement) "Just like Bishar, none of them has been charged with a crime. Not one has had a trial. Justice demands that they be brought home."

Another British resident has been cleared for release – but may be sent back to the country

feared enough to flee. He is Ahmed Ben-Bacha. Ahmed Errachidi has already been returned to Morocco, where his British Attorney is attempting to establish his status. Other British residents are: Shaker Aamer, Said Farhi, Mohammed Al Qadir, Binyam Mohamed, Abdenour Sameur and Omar Degayes, on whose behalf his brother Abu Bakr Deghayes\*\* has mounted a ceaseless campaign.

James and Jill Armstrong, retired professionals, living in the west of England and others, have had enough. They will stand as sponsor and guarantor for British residents in Guantánamo, starting with Mr Ahmed Ben Bacha. They have also discovered a vital, enabling loophole in the law (see letter below). They hope others, in the UK and elsewhere, will make their initiative into a world wide movement, shaming the US government into closing down Guantánamo, cited by Amnesty as: "The Gulag of our time".

It must be noted that it is necessary, in some cases, for nationals to take proactive action, since families fear pressure to such a degree, in the climate which prevails, that if resident in the UK or US, they fear deportation and if in their own countries, the wrath of the authorities of another kind. U.S. Independence Day, 4th July, in the ultimate irony, will mark the two thousandth day of the hopeless, pitiless, incarceration of those in Guantánamo Bay.

On 4th July 1776, Thomas Jefferson asserted the right of a nation to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness". Two searing accusations to the British monarch were: "For depriving us of the benefit of trial by jury" and: "... transporting large Armies of foreign Mercenaries to compleat the works of death, desolation, and tyranny, already begun with circumstances of Cruelty & Perfidy scarcely paralleled in the most barbarous ages, and totally unworthy the Head of a civilized nation".

Two hundred and thirty one years later, the clock has turned full circle.

PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING LETTER !

Dear Mr Ahmed Ben-Bacha,

Jill and I are very fortunate to live in a beautiful part of England where we have a comfortable home, sufficient money to live on, peace to enjoy life, and are surrounded by a circle of friends. We don't know much about you, but what we do know suggests that you might like to share our home in England and we offer you friendship, room in our house and family, and help to get you established in life.

We understand that although you are from Algeria, by your having previously chosen to live and work in Bournemouth, England - you might like to now live nearby in Dorchester. Previously our Government has said that it will only help those who have British Citizenship, we want to change that.

Many people who came to Britain from abroad, were accepted here before they had a circle of friends, wealth, any particular skill or record of work, but were given citizenship and went on to make a positive contribution to British life. Phillip, the husband of our present Queen Elizabeth; was born in Greece - not British and without a job or income when he was given citizenship in 1947.

The circle of our friends signing this letter are offering you a welcome, friendship and help getting yourself established here; in the faith that you will enrich our lives too. There is a

legal precedent, as old as any laws in Britain, of a group of people being responsible for our mutual good conduct and we are inviting you to join us in just such a group. It was anciently called "Frankpledge".

We are additionally offering you friendship. Please if you are able, let us know if you are willing to join us. Please send us more details about yourself and then we will send more about each of us so that we can get to know each other. More people are joining other groups in Britain to offer friendship to other Guantánamo prisoners. We all believe you should be encouraged to come and live in Britain because: Befriending people is the most effective force for good. Justice for everyone means not being imprisoned without trial. Britain has a long tradition of welcoming foreign-born people to live and work here.

Friendship groups, formally called Frankpledge, are constitutionally recognised in British law. At present and in the past there are well known people established in the British government, who were foreigners and now are naturalised citizens, or the family of naturalised citizens. We look forward to having our lives enriched by knowing you.

Around Dorchester the country is peaceful and beautiful. We try to go for a long walk every day. Yesterday we found a quiet village which has hardly changed for one hundred a years, with hardly any motor cars! We have seen badger and deer. We found four different types of orchid – a rare and beautiful flower which blooms in May. We heard a thrush – a bird with a loud clear tuneful song. Last month we also heard a nightingale, a bird which visits us from Africa with its beautiful song. We also have a small vegetable garden so there is plenty to keep us busy. It would give us the greatest happiness if you were able to share our happy lives and be with us soon.

Best wishes from your friends:

James Armstrong, Jill Armstrong, David Mezzetti, Nicola Beglin – and many others.

Contact: [lucicarolan@freeuk.com](mailto:lucicarolan@freeuk.com)

\* Reprieve <http://www.reprieve.org.uk>

\*\* SAVE OMAR <http://www.save-omar.org.uk>

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Please also see:

National Guantanamo Coalition <http://www.Guantanamo.org.uk>

Amnesty UK <http://www.amnesty.org.uk>

Close Guantánamo <http://web.amnesty.org/pages/guantanamobay-index-eng>

See also <http://www.cagedprisoners.com> where lawyer Assim Kuereshi has painstakingly compiled names, pictures and details of Guantánamo's disappeared.

and Leading article: A shocking betrayal that shames our government  
[http://comment.independent.co.uk/leading\\_articles/article2659657.ece](http://comment.independent.co.uk/leading_articles/article2659657.ece)

Guantanamo inmate told: You can't return to UK, you've been away too long  
<http://news.independent.co.uk/uk/politics/article2659695.ece>

*Felicity Arbuthnot is a journalist and activist who has visited the Arab and Muslim world on numerous occasions. She has written and broadcast on Iraq, her coverage of which was nominated for several awards. She was also senior researcher for John Pilger's award-winning documentary "Paying the Price: Killing the Children of Iraq". <http://www.johnpilger.com/page.asp?partID=4> and author, with Nikki van der Gaag, of "Baghdad" in the "Great Cities" series, for World Almanac Books (2006.) [http://www.amazon.com/Baghdad-Great-Cities-World-Nikki/dp/0836850491/sr=1-5/qid=1171018142/ref=sr\\_1\\_5/105-9176229-7042804?ie=UTF8&s=books](http://www.amazon.com/Baghdad-Great-Cities-World-Nikki/dp/0836850491/sr=1-5/qid=1171018142/ref=sr_1_5/105-9176229-7042804?ie=UTF8&s=books)*

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