

Victims File Suit Against CIA Torture Architects for ‘Systemic Brutality’

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Image: Suleiman Abdullah Salim, who survived the CIA’s brutal torture regime, was released after five years of being held without charge. (Photo via ACLU)

The two psychologists credited with creating the brutal, post-9/11 Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) torture regime are being sued by three victims of their program on charges that include “human experimentation” and “war crimes.”

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) on Tuesday filed the [suit](#) against CIA contractors James Mitchell and Bruce Jessen, on behalf of torture survivors Suleiman Abdullah Salim and Mohamed Ahmed Ben Soud, as well as the family of Gul Rahman, who died of hypothermia in his cell as result of the torture he endured.

The suit, which is the first to rely on the [findings](#) of the Senate Intelligence Committee report on CIA torture, charges Mitchell and Jessen under the Alien Tort Statute for “their commission of torture, cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment; non-consensual human experimentation; and war crimes,” all of which violate international law.

The pair, both former U.S. military psychologists, earned more than \$80 million for “designing, implementing, and personally administering” the program, which employed “a pseudo-scientific theory of countering resistance that justified the use of torture,” that was based on studies in which researchers “taught dogs ‘helplessness’ by subjecting them to uncontrollable pain,” according to the suit.

“These psychologists devised and supervised an experiment to degrade human beings and break their bodies and minds,” [said](#) Dror Ladin, a staff attorney with the ACLU National Security Project. “It was cruel and unethical, and it violated a prohibition against human experimentation that has been in place since World War II.”

In a lengthy [report](#), the ACLU describes each plaintiff’s journey.

After being abducted by CIA and Kenyan agents in Somalia, Suleiman Abdullah, a newly wed fisherman from Tanzania, was subjected to “an incessant barrage of torture techniques,” including being forced to listen to pounding music, doused with ice-cold water, beaten, hung from a metal rod, chained into stress positions “for days at a time,” starved, and sleep deprived. This went on for over a month, and was continually interspersed with “terrifying interrogation sessions in which he was grilled about what he was doing in Somalia and the names of people, all but one of whom he’d never heard of.”

Held for over five years without charge and moved numerous times, Abdullah was eventually sent home to Zanzibar “with a document confirming he posed no threat to the United States.” He continues to suffer from flashbacks, physical pain, and has “become a shell of himself.”

Mohamed Ben Soud was captured in April 2003 during a joint U.S.-Pakistani raid on his home in Pakistan, where he and his wife moved after fleeing the Gaddafi regime in Libya. Ben Soud said that Mitchell even “supervised the proceedings” at one of his water torture sessions.

Describing Ben Soud’s ordeal, the ACLU writes:

The course of Mohamed’s torture adhered closely to the “procedures” the CIA laid out in a 2004 memo to the Justice Department. Even before arriving at COBALT, [a CIA prison in Afghanistan] Mohamed was subjected to “conditioning” procedures designed to cause terror and vulnerability. He was rendered to COBALT hooded, handcuffed, and shackled. When he arrived, an American woman told him he was a prisoner of the CIA, that human rights ended on September 11, and that no laws applied in the prison.

Quickly, his torture escalated. For much of the next year, CIA personnel kept Mohamed naked and chained to the wall in one of three painful stress positions designed to keep him awake. He was held in complete isolation in a dungeon-like cell, starved, with no bed, blanket, or light. A bucket served as his toilet. Ear-splitting music pounded constantly. The stench was unbearable. He was kept naked for weeks. He wasn’t permitted to wash for five months.

According to the report, the torture regime designed and implemented by Mitchell and Jessen “ensnared at least 119 men, and killed at least one—a man named Gul Rahman who died in November 2002 of hypothermia after being tortured and left half naked, chained to the wall of a freezing-cold cell.”

Gul’s family has never been formally notified of his death, nor has his body been returned to them for a dignified burial, the ACLU states. Further, no one has been held accountable for his murder. But the report notes, “An unnamed CIA officer who was trained by Jessen and who tortured Rahman up until the day before he was found dead, however, later received a \$2,500 bonus for ‘consistently superior work.’”

The ACLU charges that the theories devised by Mitchell and Jessen and employed by the CIA, “had never been scientifically tested because such trials would violate human experimentation bans established after Nazi experiments and atrocities during World War II.” Yet, they were the basis of “some of the worst systematic brutality ever inflicted on detainees in modern American history.”

Despite last year’s release of the Senate Torture Report, the government has prosecuted only a handful of low-level soldiers and one CIA contractor for prisoner abuse. Meanwhile, the architects of the CIA’s torture program, which include Mitchell and Jessen, have escaped any form of accountability.

Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) issued a statement saying they welcomed the federal lawsuit as “a landmark step toward accountability,” and urged the U.S. Department to follow suit and criminally “investigate and prosecute all those responsible for torture, including

health professionals.”

In the wake of the Senate report, the group strongly [criticized](#) Mitchell and Jessen for betraying “the most fundamental duty of the healing professions.”

In Tuesday’s statement, Donna McKay, PHR’s executive director, said: “Psychologists have an ethical responsibility to ‘do no harm,’ but Mitchell and Jessen’s actions rank among the worst medical crimes in U.S. history.”

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