

14 HELD FOR YEARS IN SECRET CIA PRISONS US terror suspects to face hearings from today

AFP, Washington

The alleged mastermind of the September 11 attacks and 13 other suspected terrorists will face hearings before US panels for the first time beginning today after having been held for years in secret CIA prisons.

Having been transferred to the US Navy-run Guantanamo Bay, Cuba jail in September after spending years held in isolation by the CIA, all 14 will go before "combatant status review" panels of three military officers charged to determine whether they are "enemy combatants" in the US war on terror and merit continued detention.

The suspects include Key September 11 plotter Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and suspected conspirator Ramzi bin al-Shibh, Osama Bin Laden aide Abu Zubaydah, and Hambali, believed behind the 2002 Bali bombings.

"We will commence with the combatant status review tribunals for the 14 high-value detainees who came into DOD (Department of Defense) custody in September, commencing this Friday," Pentagon spokesman Bryan Whitman said.

Being formally judged enemy combatants will open the door for them to be formally charged with crimes, which in turn would give them the right to representation by a military lawyer and arraignment in special military tribunals recently authorized by a controversial new law.

The other 370 Guantanamo detainees have all passed through similar status review boards, in which a shackled prisoner, without a legal advocate, is presented with a bare-bones summary of the allegations he faces. Only very rarely in the status review procedures have detainees been able to cite witnesses or offer documentation in their favor.

The Pentagon says such a procedure permits the United States to balance the threat posed by the terror suspects and the desire not to hold them in custody any longer than necessary.

Status review boards for some Guantanamo prisoners have been open at times to outside observers



PHOTO: AFP

Sudanese children dressed as US-run Guantanamo prison's detainees hold posters of Sudanese cameraman Sami al-Haj during a demonstration calling for Haj's release in Khartoum last Sunday. The cameraman of Arab satellite channel Al-Jazeera was arrested by the Pakistani army on the Afghan border in December 2001 and has been held without charge at Guantanamo Bay since 2002.

including journalists.

But this time, for the 14 so-called "high value" suspects, the boards will be closed to the media, as the Pentagon says it needs to protect secret information regarding their alleged activities.

"The goal of the US government is to be transparent as possible, but I think everybody recognizes that these individuals are unique for the role they have played in terrorist operations and combat operations against US forces," Whitman said.

Written records of the proceedings will be made public days after they take place, but they will be edited to delete classified information, including the prisoner's identity, according to Pentagon officials.

"The transcript of the proceedings will have to be redacted for any

matters of national security," Whitman said.

The Center for Constitutional Rights, which is coordinating the defense of hundreds of Guantanamo detainees, has denounced the procedure, saying it undermines the credibility of the country.

The center, which represents Majid Khan, one of the 14 former CIA prisoners, has protested that the proceedings cannot legitimize his detention, saying he was subjected to "enhanced interrogation techniques" amounting to torture while held in a secret CIA prison.

The center also said Khan had not seen his lawyers since October.

"It is equally outrageous that the government has denied Khan any access to his attorneys at CCR

since October 2006, solely to prevent his torture and abuse from becoming public, and to protect any foreign governments who may have assisted or been complicit in Khan's secret detention," it said.

Since the Guantanamo prison opened in January 2002, rights advocates have assailed the denial of customary US legal rights to the prisoners there, and have pressed the government to allow prisoners to contest their detentions in front of judges with legal representatives at their sides and the proceedings made public.

Sadr renews demand for US forces to leave Iraq

AFP, Najaf

Radical Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, whose whereabouts remain a mystery three weeks after US commanders said he had fled to Iran, renewed his demand yesterday that US forces should leave Iraq.

In a message distributed by his office in Najaf to mark Friday's Arbadeen religious holiday, Sadr told his countrymen: "Raise your voices shouting 'No, no to America. No, no to Israel'."

"Use this great occasion to demand the occupier leaves our dear Iraq so that we could live in independence and stability," said the statement, which was stamped with his seal but not signed in ink.

Last month a US military spokesman said that Sadr had left Iraq for Iran ahead of a large-scale Iraqi and US joint security operation, which has since netted several members of his Mahdi Army militia.

Sadr office denies this, as does Tehran, but it has been many weeks since Sadr appeared in public or attended prayers at his mosque outside Kufa.

Previous statements have expressed support for the Shiite-led government's security forces in the operation, but have demanded that they halt their close cooperation with US troops, whom Sadr calls "the enemy occupier".

Sadr's statement also condemned attacks over the past three days on Shiite pilgrims heading to the holy city of Karbala to mark Arbadeen, which have killed more than 150 people in a series of bombings and shootings.

"May God bless the souls of the martyrs and may those responsible for these despicable crimes burn in hellfire," he said.

Nevertheless, the Shiite leader called for unity rather than revenge on Sunnis, telling Iraqis: "I beg God to unite you and distance you from the spectre of sedition and sectarian war."

Lankan troops launch major attack on Tiger base

AFP, Colombo

Thousands of Sri Lankan government troops have begun advancing towards a strategic Tamil Tiger rebel jungle base in the island's restive east, military sources said yesterday.

Troops backed by artillery and multi-barrel rocket fire were advancing towards Thoppigala, a key base of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), a military official said.

The thrust of troops came from Batticaloa district, backed by security forces in adjoining Ampara district, the sources added.

"We have not had any reports of casualties," an officer in Ampara said. "About 10,000 families in neighbouring areas have fled and sought shelter in government-held areas."

The latest offensive is the biggest since troops captured the town of Vakkarai from the Tamil Tigers in January after weeks of heavy fighting.

The government has publicly said that it wants to clear the eastern province of Tamil Tiger rebels, and Thoppigala is the last rebel bastion in Batticaloa and Ampara districts.

There was no immediate comment from the Tigers about the latest military offensive, the latest in a long series of violations of a truce agreed in February 2002.

More than 4,000 people have been killed in escalating fighting since December 2005.

Laos confirms human death from bird flu

AFP, Hanoi

Laos on yesterday announced its first confirmed human death from bird flu, a 15-year-old girl, days after reporting that the virus was believed to have killed an adult woman.

The Lao health ministry "has confirmed the death of the first person announced positive for the H5N1 avian influenza virus," it said in a statement issued jointly with the World Health Organisation (WHO).

The teenage girl from suburban Vientiane died on Wednesday in a hospital in neighbouring Thailand, where she had been treated since February 20, the ministry said.

The WHO and Lao authorities suspect the H5N1 strain on Sunday killed a 42-year-old Lao woman from another Vientiane neighbourhood, but they are awaiting laboratory test results to officially confirm the cause of death.

N Korea-Japan talks end early, amid acrimony

AFP, Hanoi

North Korea and Japan traded accusations of blame yesterday after talks held under the terms of a landmark nuclear accord ended early amid acrimony and finger-pointing.

Both sides accused each other of not taking the talks seriously after the Stalinist regime abruptly halted a meeting at its embassy in Hanoi after just 45 minutes of the second day.

The two sides parted without setting a date for their next talks.

The talks, their first direct bilateral contact in more than a year, have been dominated by an emotive row over North Korea's past abduction of Japanese citizens on one side and anger at Tokyo's attitude to its wartime past on the other.

"Because of the insincere attitude on the Japanese side it's meaningless to proceed with the talks," South Korea's Yonhap news agency quoted North Korean top envoy Song Il-Ho as saying at the end of the closed-door talks.

Japan's senior envoy, Koichi Haraguchi, denied the meeting had broken down but added, "it is deplor-

able that North Korea this time again did not show a sincere attitude towards resolving the abduction issue."

"For them to make progress in the US-North Korea relationship, they need to make progress in the Japan-North Korea relationship," he warned.

The talks had already shown first signs of strain just hours after opening Wednesday when the Pyongyang officials called off an afternoon session.

The Hanoi meeting was held as part of a global drive aimed at ending the nuclear programme of North Korea, an isolated and impoverished regime which stunned the world five months ago with its first nuclear weapons test.

Under an accord reached in Beijing on February 13, North Korea agreed to freeze its nuclear programme in return for security guarantees and fuel aid from the United States, China, Russia, Japan and South Korea.

Part of the wider agreement was that Japan and the North Korea would hold talks aimed at normalising ties.

Tokyo has refused to help fund

Militants shell Pak paramilitary base near Afghan border

AFP, Miranshah

Suspected pro-Taliban militants fired rockets on a Pakistani paramilitary base near the Afghan border yesterday causing damage to the building but no casualties, local officials said.

Militants lobbed two rockets at the headquarters of the Tochi Scouts in Miranshah, the main town of the North Waziristan tribal region, they said.

One rocket, landing inside the complex, damaged the wall while the other fell about a few hundred metres (yards) away, a security official said.

"The room was empty and there were no casualties," the official, speaking on condition of anonymity, told AFP.

A local administration official confirming the attack said "two rockets exploded early morning with a big bang but luckily no one was hurt."

Residents said soon after the incident, two Cobra helicopters were seen flying over Miranshah, apparently to locate the site of the attack.

However, officials said no arrests had been reported so far.

Thursday's rocket attack was the first on the paramilitary base in Miranshah since Pakistani authorities signed a controversial peace deal with pro-Taliban militants in North Waziristan last September.

Violence has again surged in the rugged tribal terrain after a Pakistani air strike in neighbouring South Waziristan region last month destroyed a suspected Al-Qaeda hideout.

Islamist militants have killed several tribesmen in recent months after accusing them of spying for the US-led coalition forces across the border in Afghanistan.

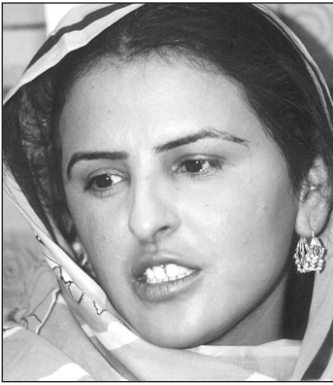
Meanwhile, Pakistani police yesterday arrested a suspected suicide bomber closely related to a pro-Taliban commander in a tribal town near the Afghan border, officials said.

The man, identified only as Waheedullah, was caught in the northwestern town of Tank amid a security alert following intelligence reports that a suicide attack was being planned on police in the area, local police chief Masood Afridi said.

"The suspect was wearing an explosive-filled jacket and was heading toward a check post when police captured him," Afridi told AFP.

Pakistan is on high security alert after a recent wave of terrorist attacks including five suicide bombings that killed more than 40 people.

Police said 18-year-old Waheedullah is the nephew of pro-Taliban commander Abdullah Mehsud, who is believed to be hiding in the rugged tribal belt along the Afghan border.



Mukhtaran Mai demands more women's rights

AFP, Karachi

Gang-rape victim Mukhtaran Mai, who has become a symbol of courage for women, expressed dissatisfaction over women's rights in Pakistan as the country marks International Women's Day.

"It will be a long struggle for the women of Pakistan to get the place they deserve in the society," Mai told AFP. "Women in many areas of Pakistan are not allowed to cast vote nor can they contest elections."

Mai, now a rights campaigner, was gang-raped and left naked on the orders of a tribal council in 2002 as punishment for her brother's alleged affair with a woman from another tribe. Her case caused an international outcry.

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan said last month that 565 people were killed, mostly women, in the name of family honour last year, showing an almost 100 per cent increase over 2005.

Pakistan introduced the death penalty for honour killings last year. Gang-rape is also punishable by death.

US astronaut fired a month after kidnap attempt

AFP, Washington

NASA on Wednesday fired a female US astronaut who made national headlines when she was arrested for driving halfway across the country in a diaper to confront a love rival.

"US Navy Captain Lisa Nowak's detail as a NASA astronaut has been terminated, effective March 8, by mutual agreement between NASA and the US Navy," NASA said in a statement.

"NASA requested an end to the detail because the agency lacks the administrative means to deal appropriately with the criminal charges pending against Nowak."

Friday, Nowak was charged with attempted kidnapping, attempted burglary and battery, for confronting the girlfriend of another astronaut in February.

After Nowak, 43, and a mother of three, was arrested in Florida, police said there was "probable cause" to believe she had intended to murder her alleged romantic rival, but she was not charged with attempted murder.

"NASA's decision to terminate Nowak's detail does not reflect any position by NASA on the criminal charges pending in Florida," the agency said.

Police said Nowak drove more than 1,500 kilometers from Houston, Texas to Orlando, Florida to attack Colleen Shipman, wearing a diaper so she would not have to take bathroom breaks.

Nowak allegedly thought Shipman, an Air Force captain, shared her romantic interest in 41-year-old shuttle pilot Bill Oefelein.

Nowak wore a wig and trench coat when she approached Shipman's car at Orlando's airport and then doused her with pepper spray, according to police.

Police found a steel mallet, a serrated knife and a loaded pellet gun in Shipman's car.

Nowak told police she only planned to "scare" Shipman into talking about her relationship with Oefelein, and had no intention of harming her.

She said her relationship with Oefelein was "more than a working relationship but less than a romantic relationship," according to a police affidavit.

Nowak was released on a 25,500-dollar bond two days after her arrest.

The case has captivated US media, earning headlines such as "Astronaughty," "Space Oddity" "Lust in Space" and "Astronut."

AFP, Washington

A former US Navy sailor was arrested Wednesday for supplying a pro-al-Qaeda website with information on US ship movements and vulnerabilities, the Justice Department said.

Hassan Abujihad, formerly known as Paul R. Hall, was arrested in Phoenix, Arizona on charges that he had supplied information on a US Navy battle group involved in missions against al-Qaeda and the Taliban to London-based Azzam Publications and the Azzam.com website, the department said in a statement.

Abujihad was being held in Phoenix for transfer to New Haven, Connecticut, where he will be prosecuted, it said.

The charges are tied to a pending terrorism case involving two British nationals linked to Azzam who are currently facing a US request for extradition from Britain.

The Azzam website, which promoted jihad and support for the mujahideen fighters and a -Qaeda in Afghanistan, had been hosted on

servers in Connecticut.

The Justice Department statement said that while Abujihad was serving in the Middle East aboard the ship USS Benfold in 2000-2001, he supplied Azzam with classified information on his battle group's movements between California and the Gulf.

The documents he supplied included a discussion of the perceived vulnerabilities of the battle group, which at the time was on a mission to enforce sanctions against the Afghan Taliban regime and undertake operations against al-Qaeda.

Charges against Abujihad, who left the navy in January 2002, include providing material support and resources to Azzam knowing these would be used to attack Americans, and providing US defense secrets to unauthorized people.

The charges could bring him 25 years in jail.

The Justice Department said that in 2003 British police searching the London residence of Babar Ahmad, one of the figures behind

Azzam, discovered a computer disk carrying the classified US Navy information.

In a further investigation another Azzam-connected figure, Syed Talha Ahsan, was shown to have accessed and made use of the password-protected file.

Investigators then found e-mails between Abujihad and Azzam in which the US sailor made a small donation, expressed enmity toward the United States and praised Osama Bin Laden, and praised the October 2006 attack on the USS Cole as a "martyrdom operation."

"Keep up ... the psychological warfare (sic)," said the Azzam response, according to the Justice Department statement.

Ahmad and Ahsan were indicted in 2004 by US authorities in Connecticut for conspiring to provide material support and resources to persons engaged in terrorism, and were arrested in London, where they now face possible extradition to the United States.