

### Ahmed Belbacha – Cleared to Leave Guantánamo Bay



Ahmed Belbacha is an Algerian national and former British resident in his seventh year of imprisonment without charge in Guantánamo Bay. The tragic irony of Ahmed's situation is that, from the US military's perspective, he could leave Guantánamo tomorrow. But Ahmed so fears what awaits him in Algeria that he has opted to wait in Guantánamo—even in Camp Six, the prison's most grim isolation wing—until another country offers him refuge.

Ahmed was born in Algiers in 1969. He comes from a middle class family with eleven children. After high school, Ahmed trained from 1988 to 1989 as an accountant for Algeria's premier oil company, Sonatrach,. He was then called for, and completed, a term of national service. When he finished, Ahmed returned to Sonatrach for approximately four years (until 1997), working in its commercial division. A keen footballer, Ahmed was also one of the star players on Sonatrach's famous amateur team.

Then a fateful turn of events changed Ahmed's quiet life: he was recalled by the army. Shortly afterwards, the major terrorist group in Algeria—the Groupe Islamique Armé (GIA)—began to threaten Ahmed's life. The GIA's stated mission was to overthrow the secular Algerian regime and install an Islamist one in its place. They threatened to murder Ahmed if he rejoined the army, and told him to quit his job at Sonatrach, as it was a government company. These were no empty threats: the GIA were notorious for killing people after their military service, and had carried out violence against Sonatrach employees. With trepidation, Ahmed finished his service a second time, knowing he would be a marked man. He hopes to lay low afterwards, instead of working for Sonatrach, Ahmed went home to his father's business and to another small company in Algiers.

But the threats continued; the GIA visited Ahmed's family and menaced them as well. So Ahmed obtained a visa in early 1999, left Algeria and travelled via France to England. He headed for Bournemouth and started his first job in the UK at the Sunlight Laundry. He then worked temporarily at the Swallow Royal Hotel while the 1999 Labour Party conference was taking place. Ahmed was in charge of cleaning Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott's room during the conference. He even received a personal thank you note from John Prescott and a healthy tip.

In Bournemouth Ahmed stayed in a hostel where a number of Algerian refugees lived. He took English courses at a local college and learnt enough of the language to get by. In July 2000 he made an asylum application and at the same time he asked for help from

Bournemouth Borough Council. The council paid for him to continue living at the refugee hostel and he took a job at a Bournemouth hotel in February 2001.

Ahmed is a serious person but never showed any interest in terrorism and was not particularly religiously orientated. He worked hard and liked playing football.

He was invited to the Home Office to discuss his asylum application in April 2001. Unfortunately, his application for asylum was refused. Around this time Ahmed was having increasing difficulty finding steady work. He became depressed, spending more and more time by himself. He told a friend in Bournemouth that he wanted to go and study in Pakistan, to take a break, then come back to England. He hoped after a few months the economy would be better and his job prospects would improve. Many Muslims at the time went to Pakistan to study the Koran, as education was free. So Ahmed left the UK for Pakistan with a friend in June 2001. He had a return ticket to come back six months later, to pursue his asylum appeal.

Once in Pakistan, Ahmed's friend suggested they see what life was like in Afghanistan, a Muslim country. This was well before September 11. Afghanistan at the time was relatively peaceful, though there was some fighting between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance. Ahmed crossed into Afghanistan and spent a few months there in an Algerian guest house. After the US invaded and the Northern Alliance began rounding up Arabs, Ahmed realized it was not safe for him to stay. He spent 20 days in the Afghan mountains before being taken to the Pakistani border by Afghans. Ahmed hoped to make it to Islamabad, from where he would fly back home to the UK.

He did not make it there. After crossing the border from Afghanistan in December 2001, Ahmed was seized in a small village and taken briefly to a border prison. He was then transferred to another prison six or seven hours' drive away, where he was held for about two weeks and interrogated by the CIA. He was then moved to Kandahar where he underwent further interrogation and was beaten and physically abused. In March 2002 he was transferred to Guantánamo. He has remained there ever since. Meanwhile, in January 2002, while Ahmed was in Guantánamo, and unbeknownst to him, his final asylum appeal was denied. The main reason: he did not turn up for the appeal hearing. The appeals judge did not know that Ahmed was a prisoner at the time.

On February 22, 2007, Reprieve received the following e-mail from the US Military:

Dear Counsel for [Ahmed Belbacha] ISN 290

[Y]our client has been approved to leave Guantanamo, subject to the process for making appropriate diplomatic arrangements for his departure.

Almost two years on, Ahmed remains a prisoner. The Americans no longer want to hold him. But, as he cannot safely return to Algeria, the question is: where will Ahmed go? To date, the UK government has refused to help him.