

Afghan prisoner held at Guantanamo Bay freed after 15 years without trial

The outside of 'Camp Five' detention facility at the US Naval Station Guantanamo Bay [Mandel Ngan/Reuters]

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Kabul, June 25 (RHC)-- An Afghan prisoner held at Guantanamo Bay for about 15 years without trial has been released from U.S. custody, the Taliban government in Afghanistan and an international human rights group said.

Asadullah Haroon Gul's release was announced on Friday by Zabihullah Mujahid, the Taliban-appointed deputy culture and information minister, who said that Gul was one of the last two Afghan prisoners held at Guantanamo Bay.

Gul, who is set to fly to Kabul soon, was detained by U.S. forces in Jalalabad in 2007 and was held for 15 years without trial, said Suhail Shaheen, a senior Taliban official who is based in Qatar.

The United States opened the notorious Guantanamo Bay prison under President George W Bush in January 2002 after the 9/11 attacks and the invasion of Afghanistan to capture al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden.

Set up to hold and interrogate those suspected of having links to al-Qaeda, dozens of suspects from multiple countries were sent there and it became notorious after reports emerged of prisoners being humiliated and tortured.

Gul was handed over to the Taliban's government as a result of their talks with US authorities, Mujahid said. "As a result of the efforts of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and its direct and positive interaction with the United States, one of the remaining two detainees, Asadullah Haroon, was released from Guantanamo prison," he said on Twitter.

The UK-based rights group Reprieve said Gul was sent to Guantanamo Bay in 2007.

"His family feared him dead for many years and for the first nine years of his captivity, he did not have access to a lawyer, despite multiple attempts to obtain legal representation," the statement said.

Reprieve and the law firm Lewis Baach Kaufmann Middlemiss filed a petition on Gul's behalf in 2016 and "demanded his release." After years of litigation, in October 2021, a Washington court ruled that Gul was not part of al-Qaeda and ordered his release.

According to the statement from Reprieve, Gul "suffered severe physical and psychological torture during his detention, including being beaten, hung by his wrists, deprived of food and water, and prevented from praying. He has been subjected to sleep deprivation, extremely cold temperatures and solitary confinement."

Commenting on Gul's release, his lawyer at Reprieve, Mark Maher, said that Gul "missed his daughter's entire childhood and he will never get back what has been taken from him, but he is now at least able to rebuild his life with his family, who have waited so long to see him."

Republican Senator Marco Rubio, vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, criticised the Biden administration for allowing Gul's transfer.

"The terrorist organisation that now controls Afghanistan cannot and will not ensure Gul, or any future detainees who are released, will not return to the battlefield and potentially kill Americans or other innocent civilians," Rubio said, referring to the Taliban, who seized power in Afghanistan last August.

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