

A torture case presented in the UK Parliament on 21 January 2004

The debate in the UK Parliament on human rights in Saudi Arabia, referred here in extract, shows confidence at a high level in the decision to adopt knowledge used by health professionals when examining torture survivors.

Mr. John Lyons (Labour): "I am delighted that the subject of human rights in Saudi Arabia has been chosen for an adjournment debate. It is obviously a vast subject and I hope that hon. Members will feel free to contribute to the debate and make known their views. I want to draw attention to Sandy Mitchell – my constituent – Ron Jones and Bill Sampson, all of whom have faced abuse and torture in Saudi Arabia. (...)

A dark tale of torture has been unfolding since the release of Sandy Mitchell and the others last August. It seems that a new allegation would surface almost every month. New information and evidence would be produced by those who had been jailed. Sandy Mitchell was a senior anaesthetic technician at the security forces hospital in Riyadh. He was arrested on 17 December 2000 and was charged with the bombing and killing of Christopher Rodway. As I said, he was finally released on 6 August last year in response to a plea for clemency that was made to King Fahd. I thank the Foreign Secretary, the Prime Minister and other hon. Members who made representations to the Saudi Government for the release of the men. During his term of imprisonment, Sandy Mitchell had to face torture, solitary confinement, and physical and psychological torture. That was a con-

tinuing story for him when he was in prison in Riyadh. (...)

The case of Sandy Mitchell and his arrest is horrific. He turned up at the hospital on 17 December at 7 o'clock in the morning, only to be arrested by the Saudi secret police. He said that he was handcuffed, hooded and taken to a detention centre where he was accused of carrying out several bombings in Riyadh. He pleaded with them and told of his innocence, but without any response. He said that he was in no way party to any bombing campaign and that he was sure that the others who had been mentioned in the arrest were not party to it, either.

Mr Mitchell was immediately faced with a beating from the people who had arrested him. He could not defend himself because his wrists and ankles were cuffed. The beating continued for several hours. He was then taken down to the cells and was chained to a door, so that he could neither sit nor lie down. He was denied sleep and rest for a total of nine days. He said that at about 10 o'clock that evening he was taken back to his house in chains by the security officers who had beaten him. They ransacked his house, and all his personal items, including clothes, cameras and diplomas were confiscated. Most of the items taken have never been returned. His wife and son were, of course, terrified by his arrest and by the state he was in when he was taken back to his house. On his return to the detention centre he was punched, kicked and spat on, and was again chained to the door of his cell so that he could neither sit nor lie down.

As I said, he was kept awake for nine days and nine nights.

During Sandy Mitchell's imprisonment his beating consisted of the torturers striking the soles of his bare feet with axe-handles, with a Saudi sitting on his chest at the same time, making it difficult and frightening for him to breathe as his feet were being beaten. He was told that he would never be released if he did not confess to the bombings. He begged his captors to check his alibi for the evening on which they accused him of being involved in the bombing. He felt certain that friends and colleagues could easily convince the police that his alibi was strong and would clear him of any guilt. He demanded a polygraph test because, as a desperate man, he thought taking such a test would prove his innocence and he would be released. This was denied to him, and the torture continued. He said that, during the beating and torture, he was bleeding continually from inside his left ear, from his nose and his mouth, and that he lost some teeth.

I do not intend to go on all afternoon. I think what I have said about the torture is enough. That story can be repeated by Ron Jones, by Bill Sampson, and by any of the other prisoners held in Saudi Arabia. Having listened to one case, one can multiply it by seven to obtain an accurate picture of what went on for a very long time – as I say, these men were held for two and a half years.

In addition to the beatings and the psychological torture, we need to consider the solitary confinement in which these prisoners were held during this period – again, an attempt to break them and extract confessions to something in which they were not involved. We know all of them, and there is no question of that. (...)

Mr Mitchell said in his evidence that after about the fifth night he could not endure the beatings and the torture anymore.

He said he was prepared to sign a confession, no matter what it said. He was given a very sweet cup of tea and asked to sit down and sign a prepared statement of his confession. This was directed by Lieutenant Khalid al Sallah, the translator for Captain Ibrahim al Dali. These two seem to have been the two main torturers of Sandy Mitchell. I will refer to both of them again, as it is important that we identify the torturers and take the appropriate action when we can.

The interrogators also wanted to know, even after Mr Mitchell had signed his confession, who had been involved with him – not only the other prisoners, but which people from the British embassy had assisted him. He could not believe that this line of questioning was being put to him, that it was suggested that the embassy was somehow involved in a bombing in Riyadh. He continued to be beaten and tortured into the eighth night, even after the confession, because they wanted further information. They said that if he would not help them further, they would bring his wife into the interrogation, because she was Thai and they could do anything they wanted to her. He said that just hearing the screams of other detainees in the prison again put him under tremendous pressure to agree to anything they were saying in terms of the British embassy involvement and the devices for the bombings.

On 25 December 2000 Mr Mitchell was hooded and taken to what he later discovered was al-Hiar prison. The officer in charge of the prison, when he saw the state of him, had him cleaned up and examined by two doctors. He then had to sign a statement that his injuries when he arrived at the prison had been based on some previous interrogation at another location. The prison was not prepared to accept responsibility for the state of him. He did sign such a statement, which, quite properly, the prison wanted him to do. He

was then given some medical help, something for the pain, and he was allowed to sleep for three days. Being denied sleep for so long must have been torture in itself, as well as the interrogation and the beatings.

Mr Mitchell said that his interrogation and the torturing had sometimes lasted for an unbelievable 14 hours. That was normal for him. Even after he had been taken to the prison the beatings continued. He was hospitalised on three occasions, first for two days, then for 14 days and then for 15 days. Imagine the extent of the injuries, to be hospitalised for that length of time. He was allowed a visit from the British embassy after 46 days. Prior to that visit he was again warned not to complain to the embassy about his treatment or he would face even further beatings and torture. At least then he felt that the embassy had been involved, and would hopefully speak up for him and for the other prisoners and get things moving regarding his case.

Mr. Mitchell was then prepared – he says “drilled” – to make a video confession for television as part of his confession, which was rehearsed many times. At first he was told that it was nothing more than a video for the private files. All of us who saw the alleged confession on television were horrified because Sandy Mitchell was reading off an auto-cue in a very unconvincing manner – and no wonder, because it was the result of beatings and torture from previous days.

So a British citizen was shown all over the world confessing to the bombings in Riyadh, and that suited a lot of internal sources in Saudi at that time. They could claim that the bombings were not the work of domestic terrorists but were quite simply the work of British or other foreign nationals working in Saudi Arabia. (...)

Sandy Mitchell was finally taken to court in July, and before he entered the courtroom

he was warned again that if he tried to retract his statement, he would be taken back to the detention centre and the torture and the beatings would continue. That is what he was faced with at the so-called Department of Justice as he was being taken into court. It took about five months for a lawyer to come and speak to Sandy Mitchell and the other prisoners about the Saudis’ abuse of their human rights during their time in prison. It was then that he had found out that he had apparently been sentenced to partial beheading and crucifixion. His sentence had already been decided before he had even seen a lawyer. (...)

Since his release, Sandy Mitchell and the others have been referred for medical examination. Despite the fact that we have moved on and it is so long since the torture and beatings, they still want to prove medically that they were tortured and beaten in Saudi Arabia. I do not intend to go through the medical evidence produced by the Parker Institute in Denmark (1), which is the world centre of excellence to which people are referred when they think they are victims of torture and want to prove it. It is important that these reports should remain private, but I shall speak to the conclusion of that report, which states:

“There is an overall accordance between the presented torture history, the described symptoms and the results of today’s examination. The findings are consistent with alleged torture with a high degree of support.

That is not an allegation by any of the men. It comes from medical evidence to support their claims. There should be no question in anyone’s mind that everything points to the statements made by Sandy Mitchell, Ron Jones and others, being 200 per cent true. The report, from such a renowned institute, confirms that in everyone’s mind. (...)

We should ... make sure that those who

are responsible for torture and beatings are brought to court and that the victim has his day in court to accuse them. (...)"

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, Mr Bill Rammell: "May I say to everyone who has participated in the debate this afternoon that we have had an exceedingly good debate on what is, undoubtedly, a very serious issue. In particular, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Strathkelvin and Bearsden, Mr Lyons on securing this debate on human rights in Saudi Arabia. I have listened carefully to all the points. (...)"

We greatly welcomed the men's release on 8 August 2003. We were relieved at their return to the UK and to their families. Indeed, Ministers and officials had worked vigorously to secure that outcome. It is worth relating the efforts that we went to when they were released."

(1) The Oak Foundation-financed Parker Institute in Copenhagen, Denmark, is a medical scientific institute which specialises in rheumatological and rehabilitation studies on torture. The Parker Institute works in collaboration with the RCT and IRCT. □