



GLOBAL NEWS | #Torture | NEWS
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UAE torture victims speak out at UN torture committee meeting

By [Liv Martin](#)



Accounts of torture by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) will be on full display at the United Nations Committee Against Torture’s review of the country, which starts today. Numerous victims shared their stories with journalists in Geneva on Monday ahead of their testimonies to the committee.

Matthew Hedges and Ali Ahmed, two Britons who had been detained in the UAE, testified before the Geneva-based committee on Wednesday, in a rare example of victims presenting their stories in person.

“Usually NGOs are briefing committees. A lot of people in fear of reprisals will not talk about their cases,” Julia Zomignani Barboza of MENA Rights Group, told journalists on Monday.

The UAE is one of 173 members to the UN Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, and has therefore agreed to regular reviews by the committee. However, there are still many accounts of torture taking place within its borders.

Hedges, a PhD student, had reportedly been in the UAE to research his thesis when he was arrested at the Dubai airport for allegedly spying for the British government. At the [press conference](#), Hedges detailed his experience of being held in solitary confinement for seven months by the UAE.

While in detention, Hedges said he also faced other abuse, such as being forced to take “upper” and “downer” drugs to stay awake and only having access to a lawyer for five minutes the day before his defence hearing.

“We’re lucky to be here and to be able to speak out as survivors,” he said.

Ahmed, another British citizen, also shared his testimony. He travelled to Abu Dhabi for a football match before being arrested by UAE police on the pretence that he was wearing a pro-Qatar football t-shirt. Ahmed said in detention he was beaten, electrocuted, stabbed and interrogated days and nights, denied food or water, and was not able to contact anyone.

Ahmed also said he was not able to receive privacy with a lawyer, and upon finally being released a month later, he was sent off in the night without his passport, bank cards or other personal items.

A third victim, Naji Hamdan, spoke to journalists about the brutal torture he endured 12 years ago. He said in detention he was beaten on the soles of his feet so badly that he could not walk for two weeks, and would often pass out due to the beatings.

Systematic abuse

A [new report](#) from MENA Rights Group, a Geneva legal advocacy NGO specialising in the Middle East and North Africa region, and the Emirates Detainees Advocacy Center explores widescale abuses in the UAE and takes a harsh look at its current legal system. The report has been submitted to the UN Committee Against Torture.

The current UAE system allows for torture to occur unchecked, from the moment people are arrested to beyond the limits of their sentences. According to the report, the UAE’s state security apparatus (SSA) is known to arrest people “without a warrant” and by “taking them to an undisclosed place, where they are detained incommunicado for long periods of time, sometimes lasting several months.”

Barboza illustrated the ways in which the legal framework is broken: people who are arrested do not have access to a lawyer until trial, and even then, there is no guarantee of a lawyer if someone cannot afford one. People are often detained on unfounded claims of terrorism.

Many of the detention centres’ locations are secret. Within these detention centres, torture is used to yield confessions or false confessions. The report found that the SSA is often responsible for accounts of torture. They will use torture as a means to get people to confess.

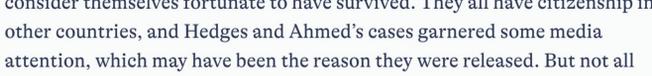
Beyond the mistreatment within detention centres, UAE courts are not independent, and like the SSA, are influenced by the president of the UAE, Barboza explained. The so-called “counselling clause” also gives the government control to keep prisoners in detention even after their sentence has been fulfilled, sometimes months or years after.

MENA and the victims of torture are hoping the UN Committee’s review can be an opportunity to create global awareness around the UAE’s continued abuse. The current climate within the country has fostered an environment that makes victims of torture fearful to speak about their experiences. Even so, in its report, MENA has been able to document numerous cases which they say “point to a widespread pattern of gross human rights violations in the UAE.”

After what Hedges, Ahmed and Hamdan have been through, they still consider themselves fortunate to have survived. They all have citizenship in other countries, and Hedges and Ahmed’s cases garnered some media attention, which may have been the reason they were released. But not all victims share the same fate.

“Think about the lives destroyed by the UAE,” Hamdan said.

The UN Committee Against Torture’s session continues until 29 July and will also examine the records of Nicaragua, Palestine and Botswana.

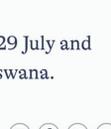


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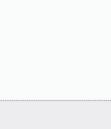
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