

Guantanamo detainee freed to Belize after 20 years in captivity

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The U.S.-run Guantanamo Bay prison has been open for more than 21 years [File: Mandel Ngan/pool via Reuters]

Washington, February 3 (RHC)-- A Guantanamo Bay prison detainee who endured torture in CIA custody has been transferred to Belize nearly a year after finishing his sentence at the U.S.-run detention facility. The Pentagon announced on Thursday that Majid Khan was freed, bringing the number of prisoners at Guantanamo to 34, including 20 who are eligible for transfer.

Khan, who was captured in Pakistan in 2003 and taken to Guantanamo three years later, said he was looking forward to beginning a new chapter in the Central American nation of 400,000 people. "Today, I feel like I am reborn. I have reentered the world," Khan said in a statement. "I'm in a little bit of shock because I have been waiting so long to be free, and I can hardly believe it has finally happened."

Khan, who went to secondary school in the U.S. state of Maryland, returned to his native Pakistan to join al-Qaeda after the 9/11 attacks in 2001. He pleaded guilty in 2012 to conspiracy to commit murder, spying and "providing material support for terrorism."

"He was sentenced in 2021 to a term of confinement for over 10 years with credit for the years he spent cooperating with U.S. personnel," the Pentagon said on Thursday. "He has subsequently completed his sentence."

The Guantanamo detention facility opened in 2002 to house detainees captured during the so-called "war on terror."

Located at a U.S. military base on illegally occupied territory Cuba, their prison operates under a legal system led by military commissions that do not guarantee the same rights as traditional U.S. courts. Detainees cleared for release sometimes spend years at Guantanamo as Washington looks for countries to take them in after they are freed.

On Thursday, the Pentagon expressed gratitude to Belize for supporting "ongoing U.S. efforts focused on responsibly reducing the detainee population and ultimately closing the Guantanamo Bay facility."

The prison once housed nearly 800 detainees, many of whom initially spent time at covert CIA locations known as black sites, where they were tortured under a so-called "enhanced interrogation" programme authorised by former President George W Bush's administration.

A 2014 U.S. Senate report detailed some of the torture techniques used on prisoners, including Khan, at these facilities. "I was a ghost, a walking dead man," Khan said in his statement on Thursday. "The CIA wanted me to remain this way forever. In fact, when I was being tortured, I often wished for death to escape the terror and the pain."

Wells Dixon, a senior lawyer at the Center for Constitutional Rights who represented Khan, said the legal advocacy group was "thrilled" by his release.

"Belize has done an outstanding job to prepare for his resettlement, and their success serves as a model for other countries to accept men who no one thinks should remain at Guantanamo but who cannot return to their home countries for humanitarian reasons," Dixon said in a statement.

Khan was released days ahead of the first-ever visit by a United Nations expert to Guantanamo.

Fionnuala Ni Aolain, the special UN rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism, will share her findings and recommendations after the trip, which is expected to begin next week.

Ni Aolain will also interview survivors of the September 11, 2001, attacks in the US as well as former Guantanamo detainees over the next three months, the UN Human Rights Office said.

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