

REUTERS

[Print](#) | [Close this window](#)

Bin Laden driver describes treatment at Guantanamo

Tue Jul 15, 2008 3:13pm EDT

By Jim Loney

GUANTANAMO BAY U.S. NAVAL BASE, Cuba, July 15 (Reuters) - Osama bin Laden's former driver took the witness stand on Tuesday at the U.S. military war court where he faces trial next week and described isolation, sleep deprivation and sexual impropriety during nearly seven years of captivity.

It was the first time prisoner Salim Hamdan, who challenged President George W. Bush and won, testified before the war court at the remote U.S. Navy base in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Hamdan's lawsuit led the U.S. Supreme Court in 2006 to strike down the original military tribunal system created by Bush.

In Washington on Tuesday, the U.S. Justice Department urged a federal judge to allow the trial of Hamdan, a Yemeni in his late 30s, to go forward. In court documents it opposed the request by Hamdan's lawyers to halt the trial based on last month's landmark Supreme Court ruling which extended some constitutional rights to the detainees.

If his trial goes ahead, it will be the first before the U.S. war court created by the Bush administration at the Guantanamo naval base, where prison camps were set up to hold terrorism suspects captured after the Sept. 11 attacks.

In pre-trial hearings this week, Hamdan's lawyers are asking war court Judge Keith Allred, a Navy captain, to exclude from trial statements their client made to interrogators because of what they call "coercive" tactics.

Hamdan took the witness stand wearing a traditional white headdress and a white gown under a Western-style beige suit jacket. He often appeared detached and somber during more than two hours on the witness stand, smiling infrequently.

Many of the allegations have already been made public in court papers.

His lawyer, Charles Swift, an Emory University law school professor, walked his client through nearly seven years of captivity from the time he was caught in Afghanistan in November 2001, where he said he was beaten and saw another captive killed, to his years at Guantanamo where he reluctantly described how a female interrogator had touched him while soldiers stood nearby.

SLEEP DEPRIVATION CLAIMED

A number of detainees have accused female Guantanamo interrogators of violating Muslim sexual taboos by rubbing or touching them provocatively.

About 265 prisoners are currently held at Guantanamo and the war court has been heavily criticized by human and legal rights organizations.

In Canada, lawyers for the only western prisoner still held at Guantanamo -- Canadian Omar Khadr -- on Tuesday released secret video taken of Khadr's interrogation. It shows him weeping and moaning "Kill me," and his lawyers said he suffered "torture and abuse" while at Guantanamo including sleep deprivation and threats of rape.

Hamdan, who has admitted driving for bin Laden, the al Qaeda leader, is charged with conspiracy and providing material support to terrorists. Prosecutors say he was a willing participant in al Qaeda while his lawyers argue he was a member of a motor pool who needed the \$200 monthly salary.

On Monday, Hamdan's lawyers said they had found a document among Guantanamo "confinement" records turned over as evidence that suggested Hamdan had been put into "Operation Sandman" -- described in press reports as a systematic sleep deprivation program -- during a 50-day period in the summer of 2003.

In court, Hamdan described how guards would pound on his cell door to awaken him the night before interrogations.

"You go back to sleep once again. The soldier comes back again within five to ten minutes," he said. "All he wants to do is wake you up. He knocks on the door or causes some rackets or noise."

Hamdan said he took naps during daylight for as much as three hours. In court documents, prosecutors said, "Hamdan's allegations of mistreatment are false."

One of only a handful of detainees to offer direct testimony at the first U.S. military war crimes tribunals since World War Two, Hamdan told the court he was beaten and threatened with death after his capture in Afghanistan.

In court papers his lawyers alleged his head was repeatedly rammed into a post while in U.S. custody in Afghanistan, noting that one of the first words he learned in English was "again" from his captors instructing that his head be slammed into the post again. (Editing by Cynthia Osterman)

© Thomson Reuters 2008. All rights reserved. Users may download and print extracts of content from this website for their own personal and non-commercial use only. Republication or redistribution of Thomson Reuters content, including by framing or similar means, is expressly prohibited without the prior written consent of Thomson Reuters. Thomson Reuters and its logo are registered trademarks or trademarks of the Thomson Reuters group of companies around the world.

Thomson Reuters journalists are subject to an Editorial Handbook which requires fair presentation and disclosure of relevant interests.