

We take Djamel

7/13/2010 6:27 PM SIBYLLE HAMANN (Die Presse)

A Guantanamo prisoner once lived in Austria. That's where he should go back to.

Guantanamo was a mistake: a mistake under international law, a mistake committed against humans and also a strategic-political blunder. Guantanamo generated the opposite of what it claimed.

It did not make America safer. It did not unearth important information about Al Qaeda. It exposed few terrorists or even convinced them of the blessings of western democracy. It did not strengthen America in its struggle against Islamic fundamentalism; on the contrary, it strengthened the propaganda of Islamic fundamentalism by playing into its hands.

We have known this all along. Many criticized the U.S. government with booming outrage – and demanded to put an end to the disgrace, release all prisoners, apologize and close up shop.

This would precisely be the right time to do so. Now would be the opportunity to do something, so that intentions will be followed by action. Guantanamo will be shut down as soon as all remaining 180 prisoners have found a place to stay. This would be the right time for Austria to write a letter.

Our colleagues at “profil” magazine discovered a man in the Guantanamo prisoner lists, who had lived in Austria for years. Djamel Ameziane, 43, Berber, Algerian citizen, college-educated water engineer, devout Muslim. In 1992 he fled the Algerian civil war, began working as a dishwasher at a trattoria in Vienna. He was hardworking and polite, worked his way up to cook. That's how it could have continued, until the Interior Ministry refused to extend his visa.

At this point many biographies derail. Going home was not an option. He couldn't stay where he was, was not allowed entry anywhere else; so go where? Not all of these derailed biographies end up in Afghanistan; unfortunately Ameziane's did. A clan chief offered him a room and turned him over to the Americans the next day. They paid a bounty of USD 5,000 for any “suspicious Arab.”

He never committed a crime, there was no evidence, never any formal charges. The Americans know today that Djamel Ameziane was no terrorist. But they don't know where to send him.

How about Vienna? The trattoria at least would “hire him back immediately,” according to statements made by its owner in “profil.”

Anyone who says that Guantanamo was a mistake must help eliminate it. Just like eleven European countries have done so far: Switzerland, Albania, and recently also Germany, which will accommodate a Syrian and a Palestinian from Guantanamo, one in Hamburg and the other one on Rhineland Palatinate.

The federal government does not need to take any heroic steps: all it takes is to write a letter to President Obama, by registered letter or by e-mail, and a little bit of courage.

Sibylle Hamann is a journalist in Vienna.