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Detainees Offer Glimpse of Life In N.Y. Facility

3 in Sept. 11 Probe Say They Were Abused in Top Security

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NEW YORK, April 16—Inside the Special Housing Unit of the Metropolitan Detention Center in Brooklyn, dozens of detainees held for months in connection with the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks have been confined to their cells nearly 24 hours a day.

The lights are always on, making it difficult to sleep. The prisoners are subject to body cavity searches after each meeting with their attorneys. They are transported in shackles, handcuffs and waist chains. In some cases, the detainees have been subject to harassment by prison guards and rough treatment that has left them bloodied.

The conditions were described by three detainees recently released from the Metropolitan Detention Center (MDC) who offered the first public glimpse of life inside the federal prison's maximum security unit, supposedly reserved for some of the most important suspects in the government's terrorism investigation.

The facility, run by the Bureau of Prisons, has come under scrutiny recently because the Justice Department's Office of Inspector General is conducting a "review" to determine whether authorities violated the civil rights of detainees held at MDC and another facility, the Passaic County Jail in Paterson, N.J.

Immigration lawyers and advocates have lodged

Detainees Held in Top Security Unit

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repeated allegations of civil rights violations involving the detainees at MDC, who over time have numbered perhaps several dozen of the more than 1,200 people picked up in the government's dragnet after Sept. 11. A legal group, the Center for Constitutional Rights, announced today that it planned to file a class action lawsuit Wednesday against federal officials and unnamed MDC corrections officers who allegedly committed abuses against detainees.

Although the Justice Department has conducted its investigation in total secrecy, it appears that none of those held under maximum security conditions has been charged with a terrorism-related crime. In fact, it is unclear why the three detainees who spoke to The Washington Post or others at MDC had been placed in the Special Housing Unit rather than other facilities where hundreds of detainees connected to the investigation have been kept in conditions that are far less restrictive.

Officials with the Bureau of Prisons, the Immigration and Naturalization Service and the Justice Department declined to comment on specific cases. One U.S. official said the decisions on where and how detainees would be confined were made at "the highest levels of the Justice Department" and were evaluated case by case.

The decisions, the official said, depended on several issues, including the nature of the evidence that had been gathered, available space in the detention facilities and whether the detainee presented a flight or safety risk.

Anser Mehmood, 42, a Pakistani immigrant, said that shortly after his arrival at MDC, prison guards shoved his face into the wall, bloodying his lip, and threatened to kill him if he spoke.

After he was strip-searched, Mehmood said, a guard asked him: "Do you know why you're here?"

"Yes. I overstayed my visa," Mehmood said he replied.

"No," the guard told him. "You are a World Trade Center suspect."

Mehmood said he was held for 123 days in the Special Housing Unit before being moved into the general population, a transition he described as "going from hell to heaven. When I came out, it was like I was a human being again."

On April 4, he was transferred from MDC to Passaic County Jail to await deportation after a judge sentenced him to time served for overstaying his

visa and purchasing a fake Social Security card that he used to gain employment.

Syed Amjad Jaffri, 38, a Pakistani immigrant, said last week that he is still not certain why he was sent to MDC after investigators arrived at his Bronx apartment in late September. Jaffri, who said he held Canadian residency status and was close to obtaining Canadian citizenship, said his landlord allowed investigators into his apartment after demanding unsuccessfully that Jaffri pay an additional \$200 on top of his \$300 monthly rent.

Jaffri, who is named as a plaintiff in the lawsuit to be filed by the Center for Constitutional Rights, admitted that he had been working in the New York area, selling surgical and dental supplies in violation of his tourist visa.

He said that while searching his apartment, investigators found a stun gun that belonged to one of his landlord's sons and materials for a home course in private investigation that he had ordered via a television advertisement.

Jaffri said the investigators seemed most interested in the stun gun and tried to persuade him to admit that it was his. He said he refused. Investigators also asked about the private investigator course work, he said.

"They kept asking me, 'Why do you want to know so much about the FBI?' " he said.

Jaffri said he was taken to an INS detention facility in Manhattan. There, he said, he was questioned again by the FBI. When he asked to see an attorney, Jaffri said, the agent swore at him and told him: "You're going to learn the hard way." Jaffri could not identify the agent.

The next day, Jaffri said, he was brought to MDC in a motorcade that included police cars with sirens blaring. With shackles around his ankles and his hands cuffed to a heavy chain around his waist, Jaffri said, he was seized by MDC guards and thrown face first into a wall. The impact, he said, bloodied his mouth and loosened his teeth.

Jaffri was released and deported to Canada on April 1. Displaying the teeth he said were loosened by the attack, Jaffri said in the interview that prison authorities denied his requests to see a dentist or receive a painkiller.

Daniel Dunne, a spokesman for the Bureau of Prisons, referred questions about cases related to the terror investigation to the Justice Department. But he said that the Bureau of Prisons investigated all allegations of staff misconduct.

Jaffri said he was placed alone in one of the small cells that prison officials referred to as "holes." The cell had one window that had been painted over, blocking the view outside. He received his meals through a slot in the door. He said for the first month and a half he was not allowed to shave and was given "two squares" of toilet paper a day.

Jaffri said the lights in his cell were on constantly, making it difficult to sleep. At night, he said, alarms went off frequently, waking the detainees, and guards often dragged heavy chains across the door.

He estimated that 60 to 70 other detainees, mostly Pakistanis and Egyptians, were also in the Special Housing Unit.

Jaffri was released April 1 and deported to Canada, where he was interviewed. He said prison authorities subjected him to a strip-search before he was taken to John F. Kennedy International Airport by INS agents and flown to Toronto. He said he has no intention of returning to the United States.

"They told me I would learn the hard way," he said. "I learned the hard way. That's the bottom line."

Shakir Ali Baloch, 39, a Canadian citizen and a native of Pakistan, offered a similar description of life inside the Special Housing Unit. Baloch said he was taken into custody by FBI and INS officials in late September while attending classes in Queens to gain his taxi license.

Baloch said he had entered the country illegally from Canada and had illegally purchased a fake Social Security card to acquire a driver's license. But he said he is still unsure why authorities decided to put him in MDC.

He said he suspects it had something to do with a paperback military novel investigators found while searching his apartment. The novel, he said, featured an advertisement on the back for another book and had a photograph of Osama bin Laden.

"I think the book was the biggest reason," Baloch said during an interview this week inside the Passaic County Jail, where he was transferred after months at MDC. Baloch was deported to Canada one day after the interview.

Baloch said he was kept in solitary confinement until Feb. 14, when he was moved into the general population at MDC. There, he had access to television, books and newspapers and was allowed to make phone calls.

Asked whether he was angry about the way he had been treated, Baloch said: "No, I'm not angry. I just want to go home."