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America kidnapped me

December 18, 2005 | Khaled El-Masri | KHALED EL-MASRI, a German citizen born in Lebanon, was a car salesman before he was detained in December 2003.

THE U.S. POLICY of "extraordinary rendition" has a human face, and it is mine.

I am still recovering from an experience that was completely beyond the pale, outside the bounds of any legal framework and unacceptable in any civilized society. Because I believe in the American system of justice, I sued George Tenet, the former CIA director, last week. What happened to me should never be allowed to happen again.

I was born in Kuwait and raised in Lebanon. In 1985, when Lebanon was being torn apart by civil war, I fled to Germany in search of a better life. There I became a citizen and started my own family. I have five children.

On Dec. 31, 2003, I took a bus from Germany to Macedonia. When we arrived, my nightmare began. Macedonian agents confiscated my passport and detained me for 23 days. I was not allowed to contact anyone, including my wife.

At the end of that time, I was forced to record a video saying I had been treated well. Then I was handcuffed, blindfolded and taken to a building where I was severely beaten. My clothes were sliced from my body with a knife or scissors, and my underwear was forcibly removed. I was thrown to the floor, my hands pulled behind me, a boot placed on my back. I was humiliated.

Eventually my blindfold was removed, and I saw men dressed in black, wearing black ski masks. I did not know their nationality. I was put in a diaper, a belt with chains to my wrists and ankles, earmuffs, eye pads, a blindfold and a hood. I was thrown into a plane, and my legs and arms were spread-eagled and secured to the floor. I felt two injections and became nearly unconscious. I felt the plane take off, land and take off. I learned later that I had been taken to Afghanistan.

There, I was beaten again and left in a small, dirty, cold concrete cell. I was extremely thirsty, but there was only a bottle of putrid water in the cell. I was refused fresh water.

That first night I was taken to an interrogation room where I saw men dressed in the same black clothing and ski masks as before. They stripped and photographed me, and took blood and urine samples. I was returned to the cell, where I would remain in solitary confinement for more than four months.

The following night my interrogations began. They asked me if I knew why I had been detained. I said I did not. They told me that I was now in a country with no laws, and did I understand what that meant?

They asked me many times whether I knew the men who were responsible for the Sept. 11 attacks, if I had traveled to Afghanistan to train in camps and if I associated with certain people in my town of Ulm, Germany. I told the truth: that I had no connection to any terrorists, had never been in Afghanistan and had never been involved in any extremism. I asked repeatedly to meet with a representative of the German government, or a lawyer, or to be brought before a court. Always, my requests were ignored.

In desperation, I began a hunger strike. After 27 days without food, I was taken to meet with two Americans -- the prison director and another man, referred to as "the Boss." I pleaded with them to release me or bring me before a court, but the prison director replied that he could not release me without permission from Washington. He also said that he believed I should not be detained in the prison.

After 37 days without food, I was dragged to the interrogation room, where a feeding tube was forced through my nose into my stomach. I became extremely ill, suffering the worst pain of my life.

After three months, I was taken to meet an American who said he had traveled from Washington, D.C., and who promised I would soon be released. I was also visited by a German-speaking man who explained that I would be allowed to return home but warned that I was never to mention what had happened because the Americans were determined to keep the affair a secret.

On May 28, 2004, almost five months after I was first kidnapped, I was blindfolded, handcuffed and chained to an airplane seat. I was told we would land in a country other than Germany, because the Americans did not want to leave traces of their involvement, but that I would eventually get to Germany.

After we landed I was driven into the mountains, still blindfolded. My captors removed my handcuffs and blindfold and told me to walk down a dark, deserted path and not to look back. I was afraid I would be shot in the back.

I turned a bend and encountered three men who asked why I was illegally in Albania. They took me to the airport, where I bought a ticket home (my wallet had been returned to me). Only after the plane took off did I believe I was actually going home. I had long hair, a beard and had lost 60 pounds. My wife and children had gone to Lebanon, believing I had abandoned them. Thankfully, now we are together again in Germany.

I still do not know why this happened to me. I have been told that the American secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, confirmed in a meeting with the German chancellor that my case was a "mistake" -- and that American officials later denied that she said this. I was not present at this meeting. No one from the American government has ever contacted me or offered me any explanation or apology for the pain they caused me.

Secretary Rice has stated publicly, during a discussion of my case, that "any policy will sometimes result in errors." But that is exactly why extraordinary rendition is so dangerous. As my interrogators made clear when they told me I was being held in a country with no laws, the very purpose of extraordinary rendition is to deny a person the protection of the law.

I begged my captors many times to bring me before a court, where I could explain to a judge that a mistake had been made. Every time, they refused. In this way, a "mistake" that could have been quickly corrected led to several months of cruel treatment and meaningless suffering, for me and my entire family.

My captors would not bring me to court, so last week I brought them to court. Helped by the American Civil Liberties Union, I sued the U.S. government because I believe what happened to me was illegal and should not be done to others. And I believe the American people, when they hear my story, will agree.