

Jessica Bean

Subject: Season's Greetings from JTF-GTMO

(Based on an email sent to the Guantánamo detainee attorneys in December 2007.)

Gita and I are the last habeas counsel to leave the base this year, so I thought I'd send those of you fortunate enough to miss the holiday festivities season's greetings on behalf of the Joint Task Force-Guantánamo. Pour yourself a mug of some heavily-doctored seasonal beverage and close your eyes for a moment to picture the Christmas tree display in front of the Navy Exchange, in between the Subway sandwich shop and the gift shop—the one with the “kisses from Guantánamo Bay” shot glasses and the “sinking our teeth into the Middle East” t-shirts.

Swathed in fake cotton ball snow stand no less than fifteen synthetic Christmas trees. Each tree has its own theme, collectively representing every facet of Guantánamo life, except, of course, for one. McDonalds and Subway each have their own tree, which sport take-away boxes and paper cups as ornaments. The Guantánamo Youth Center has a tree, as do the Guantánamo Police and Fire Departments, with yellow police tape garlands. The contractors have a tree festooned with electrical wire and toy trucks, with a hard hat perched on top. There's a “third-party national” tree decorated with foreign flags, representing the migrant laborers and refugees who provide Guantánamo with most of its civilian labor, and a “GTMO Latino Families—new generation” tree, with smiling photos of the new generation.

A lot of the decorations are cute and clever, in a banality of evil sort of way. My favorite might be the sick tree. It's draped in hospital bracelet chains, with pill bottles, urine sample vials, and syringes hanging from its branches. With all these resources so readily available, I wonder, why hasn't our client received proper eyeglasses, despite having asked for them for over a year? His vision has been deteriorating severely due to so many years of confinement in his small cell, unable to focus his eyes beyond the walls a few feet away. On top of the tree is a star wrapped in an ace bandage, and if you read the dangling prescription bottles carefully, you'll see they're for “Holiday Cheer: 100 mg. Take once a day as needed. Signed: Dr. S. Claus.” Faced with the prospect of reintegrating into the real world of American denial just four days before Christmas, I consider the bottle with mild interest before I snap out of it.

But wait, something's missing. No barbed wire garlands, no orange? Given the rather literal interpretations favored by the tree designers, it's all too easy to envision the one tree they thought it best to omit.

Happy Holidays.