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The General Who Was Just a Cook

by Christopher Chang Guantanamo Investigator at Reprieve, London.

Just a few months after joining Reprieve as a volunteer in the summer of 2005, I found myself thrown into the deep end by our legal director Clive Stafford Smith and asked to carry out some very urgent investigation on the case of one of our clients, Ahmed Errachidi, a Moroccan national who had lived in the UK for eighteen years. Ahmed had lived and worked in the catering industry in London as a chef; however, after his capture in Afghanistan the U.S. authorities were convinced that his command of the English language and his defiance in the face of those abusing him could only mean that he was someone high up the al Qaeda ladder. And so Ahmed became the “General.” In his visits with Clive it became clear that Ahmed was very far from being any General.

He told Clive about his son Imran and his heart defect that needed urgent treatment, treatment that in Morocco costs a small fortune. He explained how he had travelled to Pakistan in September 2001 with the idea of buying cheap silver which he could resell in order to pay for his son Imran’s medical treatment in Morocco. After 9/11 when the U.S. military started bombing Afghanistan, Ahmed crossed the border and tried in vain to ease the suffering as the bombs rained down. Ahmed was no al Qaeda general but a father who, like so many others, was willing to go to the ends of the earth to help ease the suffering of his child.

Whilst the Blair government had managed to get eight British citizens home from Guantánamo, albeit they left them to suffer for several years, in regards to nine other British residents, which included Ahmed, they took a stance of complete non-assistance. The British Foreign and Common, writing in response to our letters about the British residents, continually stated that their policy was NOT to offer consular assistance to individuals who were not British citizens. I could not believe how my government had left British residents like Ahmed

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to rot in Guantánamo. Being of Jamaican parentage and often hearing the problems of family members regarding immigration, I imagined that this is how someone I know could be treated just because their passport does not bear the magic words “British Citizen.” Ahmed had lived here for nearly twenty years, lived and worked and paid taxes. He paid into British society, contributed to that society, and yet my government, for want of a better phrase, washed their hands of him.

We were given just a matter weeks/days by the U.S. military to submit new evidence for Ahmed’s Annual Review Board (ARB)—the process that takes place in Guantánamo to decide whether a prisoner is still a threat to U.S. national security—which meant me running around in between my paying job and college to try and gather as much evidence to disprove the allegation that Ahmed had been “identified as having received training at the al Farouq training camp in July 2001, to include weapons training, war tactics and bomb making.” So on a cold evening in February 2006 I set out on the trail to prove exactly the opposite of the headlines shouting loud to the world that Ahmed Errachidi was the “Cook who became the General.”

I needed to hone in on July 2001 and prove that Ahmed was here in London, so I took his CV and checked his employment history. Included on his CV was Christopher’s Temporary Employment Agency based near Victoria train station in London. Phone calls to a very helpful woman at the agency proved fruitless. She said it had been so long ago since Ahmed had worked for them that they probably wouldn’t have his records, and they routinely destroy their employee records after two years. I kept pressing, and she kept looking but ultimately found nothing. So in the end I thought to myself, “Screw this. I’m going to head down there.” I always believe that the face-to-face approach generally gets more results, either that or it’s the strength of my South London charm. Whichever it may be, and I’m leaning towards the latter, I jumped on the tube and found Christopher’s Agency in Victoria. I had

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worked from temp agency to temp agency after finishing university, but this one was somewhat different from the ones I had frequented. With no fancy shop front, Christopher's Agency was a dimly lit, two room, dingy place on the first floor of some dingy business centre. The helpful young woman I had spoken to on the phone was there to greet me saying that she had kept looking and by some stroke of luck had found Ahmed's pay records. I waited as the photocopier warmed up so she could make me copies, and I left excitedly, studying them as I weaved in and out of the people on my way back to Victoria tube.

On the tube I was scanning hard for my magic month: July 2001. Sure enough the records showed that Ahmed had worked on various catering assignments for Christopher's from May to July 2001. I returned to the office literally beaming as I told the others there that I had managed to get hold of Ahmed's work records. I held in my hands documentary evidence that Ahmed was here during the month he was supposedly in an al Qaeda training camp and that was amazing, a real breakthrough.

But there was no resting on any sort of laurels, and with the ARB looming, we felt we needed more than just these records to strengthen Ahmed's case. There was an empty period between Ahmed finishing work with Christopher's Temp agency and his departure for Morocco. Ahmed had told Clive that before leaving for Morocco in September 2001 he had been promised a job at a restaurant called Café Loco in Muswell Hill, in North London. He said the restaurant owner was very nice to him. They had even talked about his son Imran, and this guy had offered to lend Ahmed the money to pay for the treatment. I needed to find this man; time was of the essence. I had a name and a description from Ahmed. His name was John, a big Jewish man who drove an American car. I didn't want to go straight back to Café Loco because they had told another one of our volunteers that they did not want to help her. They also told this volunteer, Rhumana, who by the way was one of the nicest, kind natured and soft spoken people I have met, that she was harassing them, and she should not come back there. So

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Café Loco wasn't an option. I did risk a call though, and they told me John no longer owned the joint. Ahmed had told Clive that John owned another restaurant in Camden, North London, on the same road as the office of another hardworking British lawyer—Gareth Pierce. With that I was on it, on the trail around Camden's restaurants, but no one knew "Big John" as I began to affectionately refer to a man I had never met, that is until I went into a large, red-fronted restaurant that was part American diner, part Mexican Cantina, part North African coffee shop.

The guy who owned this place knew him alright. And he gave me a little more information. He told me 'Big John' was Jewish Moroccan to boot and what's more, he still owned Café Loco. I told him the full story about Ahmed – another thing I was learning on the way was honesty was more often than not the best policy. I told him we needed a signed statement that would confirm that Ahmed had been offered a job at Loco towards the end of July. The other information about Imran and John's offer to lend Ahmed the money for his treatment would help, too. This guy was quite sympathetic. He told me to come back the following night, and he would see what he could find out for me. I asked him his name—he didn't tell me—that was that. I returned the following evening and met the unnamed proprietor of the red restaurant. He said Big John was not in the country, but he definitely still owned Café Loco. His sister in law Cathy was the manager. He said that I should go up there, and she could put me in touch with John. But above all he reminded me that I had not seen him, had not been there, had not spoken to him. I nodded, shook his hand and headed up to Muswell Hill that very night.

At Café Loco, there wasn't much crazy happening on a quiet, midweek night. There were a few people dining towards the rear of the place. I asked for Cathy the manager. Before they could point me in the right direction, someone had come right up behind me and in a very aggressive tone asked me who I was. He was so close I backed into him as I turned round to respond. I explained and he told me to come and sit down with him near the entrance to the

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restaurant. I explained how important it was for us to get an affidavit from Big John or Cathy confirming that they had met Ahmed and offered him a job. He got angry very quickly saying that he was sick and tired of “you lawyers” coming here and harassing them. I kind of liked that, thinking that I had been called a lot of things but never a lawyer. I wondered how many loud clothed, sneaker wearing lawyers he had met. Incidentally my visit was only the second Reprieve jaunt up there, so I’m not sure if that constitutes harassment.

He said that Cathy was his girlfriend and she does not want to help, in fact she wanted nothing to do with us, period. This was annoying to me! First, we had not been harassing them. In fact when my colleague Rhumana met Cathy some months back, Cathy had been very nice and even gave Rhumana her phone number so she could call and talk more about Ahmed. Second, I was not asking for a glowing testimonial on how great a guy Ahmed was. I just wanted something signed confirming the job offer and the dates that they had offered it to Ahmed. Third, this was a man’s freedom we were talking about, an innocent man – no, more than that this was Ahmed’s life we were talking about. I just couldn’t understand why they did not want to help him when it was in their power to do so, or why they did not want to tell the truth.

He became even angrier as I continued and got himself so worked up that he told me if I would not accept their refusal to help, I should step outside with him. I was thinking that surely he doesn’t want a fight, so I said okay and stepped outside with him. That’s when he really let rip; he was swearing and had his hands up in my face. He was up for it. Later when I told Clive about my visit, he said that he was glad I went to Café Loco as he could not think of anyone else at Reprieve who would be LESS intimidated by such aggressive behaviour. I asked him to calm down and that I had not come here for any trouble. I told him as plainly as possible while staring him straight in the eye that this was not a joke and that this was indeed a matter of life and death. His girlfriend Cathy had it within her power to help Ahmed. I was literally

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pleading with him to help. As I spoke man to man with him, or human being to human being to be more politically correct, somehow this seemed to reach him, and he listened. As he did so, his face changed; he seemed to understand. He said he would talk to Cathy and get back to me. I left it at that, shook his hand and then my head after he went back inside the restaurant.

That very night I saw the post 9-11 climate live and direct in full effect. Even here in London people did not want anything to do with anything that even sniffed of terrorism. They didn't want to help Ahmed and what's more they didn't want themselves or their establishment associated with him, whether Ahmed was a terrorist or not. So the best policy was one of non-involvement, and that constantly frustrated me.

Later that week I met someone called Fabrice who had worked with Ahmed at his last gig for Christopher's personnel at the Westbury hotel in London. He now owns a very trendy French delicatessen in west London, the kind of place that sells organic pressed apple juice, French camembert and saucisson. He would help us confirm that Ahmed was working as a breakfast chef when he was supposedly in Afghanistan in an al Qaeda training camp. His signed affidavit would give Clive his much loved and much told story about Ahmed cooking eggs in the Westbury Hotel as opposed to cooking up anything else in an Afghani training camp. Even Ahmed himself said to Clive that the American authorities have "made the breaking of an egg into the bursting of a bomb." Fabrice and Ahmed did not get on at all and spent the short time working together arguing about one thing or another. This was great, because often and especially at work the person you remember most is the person you could just not stand to work with. We can all remember that manager we couldn't stand or that co-worker we just loved to hate. So the fact that Fabrice did not really like Ahmed made for a much stronger affidavit, and unlike the folk at Café Loco and despite the fact that Fabrice did not particularly get on with Ahmed, he was still prepared to offer us a signed statement which I collected from him the next day.

The ARB submission deadline was still hanging over my head and I wanted to do as much as I possibly could do make sure there were no gaps in Ahmed's life from July and even before, right up until the date he left to go to Morocco. And I was doing all this whilst still working, so I had to get as much done as I could before, after, and during work. Wherever possible I tried to get out of work early, so I could do all the running around that was needed. I was all over London, on the phone, on email trying to make sure we had as much concrete proof as possible that showed Ahmed was here the whole time before he left for Morocco in September. I chased down his bank records to see whether he had been using his ATM card in July, but Ahmed had been out of work after his last assignment for Christopher's personnel so there had been no money in and no money out after that. The way Guantánamo is set up can prove a nightmare for an investigator. I couldn't just ask Ahmed something if there was something I wanted to know. I couldn't double check something with him. It could be months between visits from Clive just to ask him national insurance number or the name of his landlord, and even if Clive could do so, Ahmed might not remember. Armed only with a letter printed on Reprieve letterhead letter explaining who I was and what I was doing and a copy of Ahmed's authorisation form allowing us to act upon his behalf, I was attempting to write Ahmed's story, to put together a picture of his life before Guantánamo.

I went to the apartment where he lived several times and each time the farthest I got were brief conversations with the young children living there through an intercom. Frustration – because whilst I may have thought that the parents of the kids were in the background telling them to say there was no adult present, I wasn't about to get aggressive or try to force my way in, so I had to just wear it and walk.

I also met two of Ahmed's friends who loved him like a brother and would do anything in their power to help. They joined me on the trail too, juggling work and personal responsibilities to try and find the information we needed, the information that Ahmed needed.

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His friend Abderrezzak told me that Ahmed had not left the country before September and that they saw each other every couple of days. He was also the last person to see Ahmed in the UK as he had taken him to the airport. He remembered accompanying Ahmed to the travel agent to buy his return plane ticket, which we obtained a copy of earlier this year. Abderrezzak said that Ahmed had to get his passport back from his solicitors so that he could travel. Because Ahmed had a home office application pending for residence, he would not have been able to travel as he did not have a passport. This took me to Malik and Malik solicitors. We had written to Malik and Malik solicitors on several occasions, however they did not have Ahmed's records as they had either been destroyed or lost when Malik and Malik relocated to larger premises. I spoke to one of the Maliks who seemed to remember Ahmed's case. He was pretty sure that Ahmed had been granted indefinite leave to remain in the UK. Unfortunately he did not have any documentary evidence to attest to this. He also said that often they do not keep the files. Once they have finished working with a client they usually give him his file. So it was quite likely they did not even have his file. What he also explained to me is that Ahmed would not have been able to travel whilst his home office application was ongoing. This was further proof that Ahmed was in the UK in July 2001.

So the ARB submission was almost ready to go. We added in the receipt for a money transfer that Mohammed had made to Morocco in July and statements from his two friends. I also added in research on the Finsbury Park Mosque here in London. One of the allegations was that Ahmed had attended this mosque which was a known hotbed for extremism. The mosque has been all over the news in the UK at one time or another, especially since the start of the war on terror. Apparently there is a notorious gift shop within the Mosque selling various materials—books, DVDs—all about jihad. However seldom reported is the fact that there are two Mosques in the Finsbury Park area of London; the one that has strong links with extremism and the Muslim Welfare House which was founded during World War II with a £100, 000

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commitment from Winston Churchill and which in more recent years has received praise from His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, Prince Charles, and the Mayor of London, Ken Livingstone.

The ARB submission was good to go, and the first ever affidavit bearing my name went along with it. Clive would joke that that was it and now my name would have gone into the CIA computer database. He said I should look out for strange folk loitering around outside my mother's house and listen out for strange noises on my mobile phone. I now joke and tell people I know to be careful too and that maybe they're being followed or their phones are being tapped because of their association with me. We would now wait to see if this submission would go some way to getting Ahmed out of Guantánamo.

In the year to follow I continued the investigation into Ahmed's case, although not at the same speed as before. I had covered most things with just a few leads that I really wanted to follow up. I tried hard to get media coverage on Ahmed's case, working with journalists from local and national newspapers. One local paper that followed Ahmed's story from the first day I spoke to one of their writers printed big posters about Ahmed which went in the windows of the local shops and news agents in the area where Ahmed lived. I always believe that local press is really important as a way of getting people angry and aggrieved that some one of the "locals," one of their own, is having a bad time.

I arranged meetings with his local members of parliament. This year his MP even wrote to George W. Bush himself demanding Ahmed's release. I am always a little wary of the MPs as they always have their own agendas when getting involved in a case; nevertheless, if they are committed, they can give us the political weight we often need. Ahmed's MP helped us with something that had been giving me considerable grief: getting a hold of Ahmed's home office file. The problem in getting such documents for our clients is that the release form we have authorising us to do so is only a copy. For security reasons the originals are held in a

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secure facility in the U.S. Some places will accept our release form when I added a touch of my famous charm or an accompanying letter. However, the home office would not accept our photocopy even with a letter stating it was a true copy of the original. On a trip to the States, our senior counsel, Zachary, managed to get the original. Between this and some help from Ahmed's MP, we were able to get hold of his file.

It was only a matter of weeks after we finally got hold of Ahmed's home office when we received an email from the U.S. Department of Justice via one of our colleagues in the U.S. stating that Ahmed had been released and transferred to the control of the Moroccan authorities. Shit! I couldn't believe it. I had two feelings; one was happiness that he had finally been given his long overdue freedom, but two, I was angry that he had not been returned here to the UK. Another cause for anger was that, as per usual, we had been kept completely in the dark, only being told of his transfer after it had happened. As it had happened so often, his legal team was kept completely in the dark about these extremely important developments. We are often the last to know when these things are happening—deliberately kept in the dark so that we are in practice robbed of all opportunity both legally, politically and in the media, to challenge any decision made.

There was little time, however, to remain angry as whilst we had been told by the U.S. State Department that Ahmed had been transferred back to Morocco we did not know where he was. I informed his brother in Morocco, but he had not been told where Ahmed was. I was on the phone to the Department of Justice in Morocco, but they would not give me any information. I had human rights organisations on the ground looking, checking with their contacts in the prisons to see if anyone from Guantánamo had recently arrived—nothing! I was calling Morocco from a friend's home telephone at five in the morning to try and find out where he was. A journalist from Reuters was in Rabat too asking the same questions to the relevant government bodies. I just wanted to know where he was. But no one was talking. I

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had done enough research to know all about the Moroccan authorities and what their secret police were capable of. His family knew, too, and they were right to be worried and fearful.

For a week we had nothing. I was angry, frustrated, worried. We spent that week on the phone, sending faxes and emails. I set a deadline that if by the end of the week I had heard nothing either I or someone else from Reprieve would travel to Morocco and raise some hell to find out where he was.

Then that very weekend, Saturday evening I believe, I was at my sister's house for dinner when I received a call from Ahmed's brother Abdeljabbar. He said Ahmed had been released and was right there with them. I couldn't believe it—my heart was racing; the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. I was ecstatic. I could hear the sounds of Ahmed's family in the background; I could hear the happiness, the joy. Abdeljabbar thanked me profusely on behalf of the whole family before saying that Ahmed wanted to talk to me himself. Ahmed came to the phone, and I was so relieved when he said he was unhurt. He thanked me for all the work that we had done on his case. This was one of the most emotional phone calls I have ever had in my life. I was truly choked up. I told him how happy I was that he was home, safe, free.

Ahmed also told me that he had bags full of letters that people had written to him and that he was sorry he had not written back, but that because he had spent most of his time under disciplinary sanctions in Guantánamo, he was not allowed to write letters. I passed him Clive's mobile number so that he could call him, too and told him that our work was not done. If he needed anything, he only had to call me.

This was the first time I had ever spoken to Ahmed and yet I knew him so well. I had spent over a year getting to know him, and somehow the warmth with which he spoke to me on the phone was proof that he knew me, too. This was a truly wonderful moment. I came off the phone, tears in my eyes. My sisters and other members of the family wanted to know who was on the phone. I explained, and they were happy for Ahmed and showered me with handshakes

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and much back patting. I called all those friends who knew I had been working on Ahmed's case to tell them the good news, too. I even went home and cracked open a bottle of champagne to toast Ahmed. I have worked extensively on the cases of several of our clients, but Ahmed's case was my first investigation for Reprieve. I remember when I first started working on Ahmed's case that my colleague Zachary impressed upon me how important this investigation was. He hoped I would see the investigation on Ahmed's case out until the end, until Ahmed was released. And here I was a year and a half later, and Ahmed was free and home with his family. I was happy and proud of what our little organisation had achieved.

Ahmed is back home in Tangiers, Morocco with his wife, kids, and family, trying to get his life back after over five years of unlawful incarceration and abuse at the hands of the American authorities, over five years of his life stolen away from him and from his family. He is a Moroccan, but Morocco is a place he doesn't know, millions of miles away from the world he knew here in the UK. This was home for eighteen years. The only thing that upsets me is that he wasn't returned here, the proud chef who had lived and worked in London for so long. In Morocco he has to cope with starting a new life.

I'll always feel ashamed of how my government left Ahmed to rot in Guantánamo, left him as one of the longest serving prisoners in solitary confinement, left an innocent man to suffer when it was in their power to get him out. Maybe complicity is a dirty word, but it's most definitely one that is appropriate here. I'll leave it at that. I'll probably never know for sure if the evidence we submitted for his ARB was the reason he was released. But sometimes I look at it like this: we carried out unpaid investigation for the U.S. military, an investigation which proved that he was just a cook and not a general. They never had anything on Ahmed. He was just another Pakistani lottery scratch card cashed in for around \$5000 by the Pakistani military.

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Ahmed has enjoys cooking again, and soon after his release, Clive went to visit Ahmed at his home in Morocco. Ahmed that he would feast on some of the finest fish dishes, dishes which had won him so much praise when he worked here in London. Clive told me that unfortunately he could not eat the copious amounts of food placed before him. I laughed when soon after Clive's return to the UK, Ahmed emailed me inviting me to come and visit him whenever I like. He said, "Hopefully you're a better eater than Clive." One day soon I will visit Ahmed, this man I know so well.