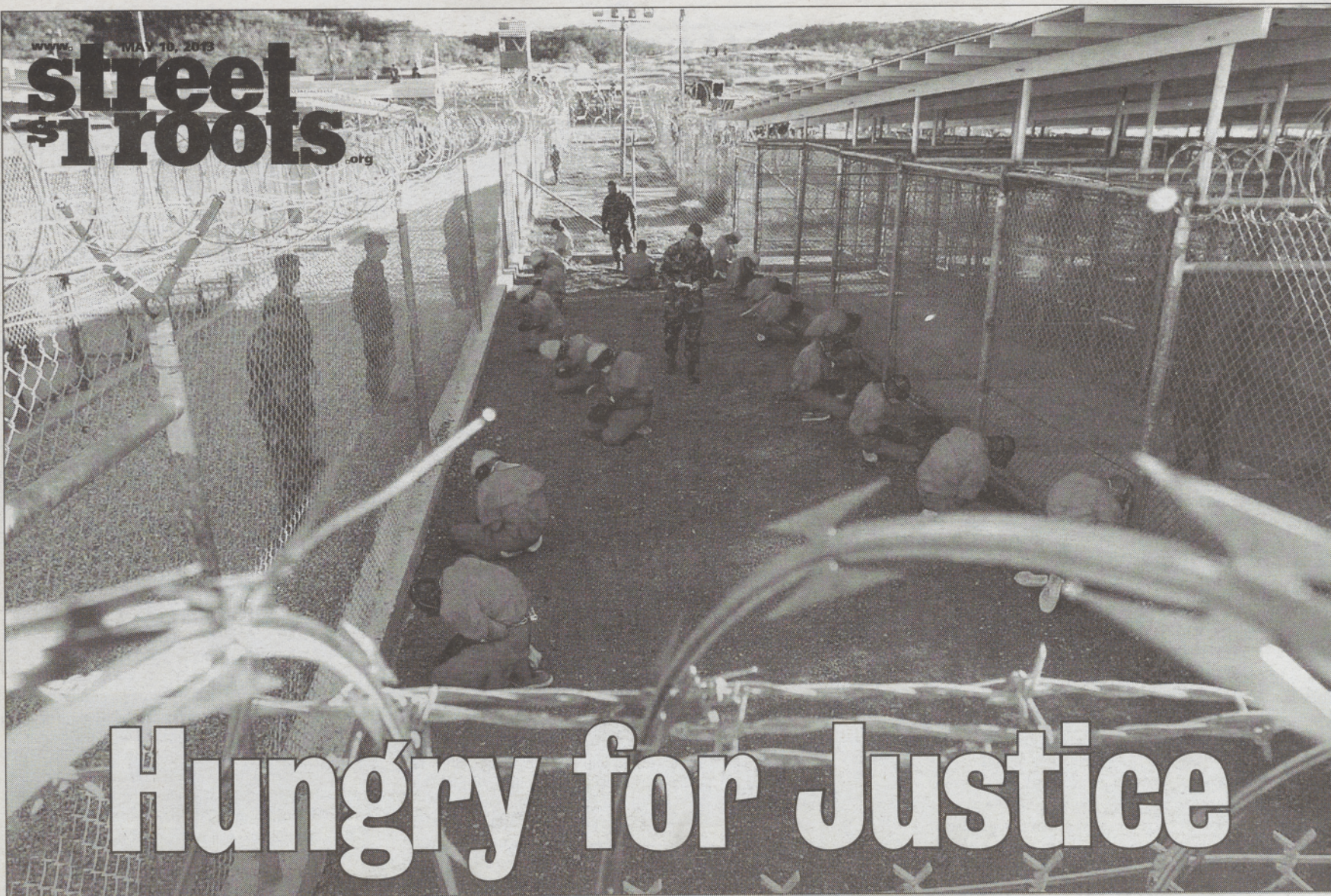




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MAY 10, 2013
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Hungry for Justice

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A personal perspective on the humanitarian crisis at Guantanamo Prison

BY MARTHA GIES
CONTRIBUTING WRITER



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On Sunday, March 24, in response to an email I'd received the day before, I quit eating. Witness Against Torture (WAT) had proposed a Holy Week fast in solidarity with the detainees at Guantánamo, some of whom had been on a hunger strike for six weeks.

I gave away the organic produce I'd just brought home from the market, checked the date stamps on the dairy products, and began the fast on Passion Sunday.

The decision had been abrupt and left me with unanswered questions: Who was still at Guantánamo? Why were they still there? Why were they on hunger strike now? What does it mean to act "in solidarity?" I pondered these questions to distract myself from hunger.

According to Andy Worthington, the British journalist and pre-eminent Guantánamo scorekeeper, 86 of the 166 detainees who remain at Guantánamo have been cleared in U.S. court for release, some as long as nine years ago. They came from 23 different countries, with Yemen conspicuously over-represented. The 56 Yemenites cleared for release were not repatriated because Yemen is deemed "unstable."

Yemen. My ignorance is vast. My single connection is through my Veracruz dance partner whose Yemenite rabbi grandfather resettled in British Palestine in 1923. Researching Yemeni food, I discovered saltah, said to be the national dish. A recipe from the Toronto Star uses ground lamb, onions, potatoes in a beef broth, with lots of spices. This was Tuesday, the third day of my fast: Saltah sounded delicious.

Guantánamo's detention hospital has a protocol: Staff are required to explain the grave risks to

anyone who refuses food. A translator, a witness and a medic all sign a report, testifying that the detainee now "understands that they may experience hunger, nausea, tiredness, feeling ill, headaches, swelling of their extremities, muscle wasting, abdominal pain, chest pain, irregular heart rhythms, altered level of consciousness, organ failure and coma." According to the protocol, detainees have to refuse nine consecutive meals before they are officially recognized as hunger strikers.

From the beginning there was controversy over how many were participating. On Monday, March 25, Ben Fox of the Associated Press had reported a new tally: Defense lawyers claimed as many as 100, while Navy Captain Robert Durand, Guantánamo spokesman, acknowledged only 28, ten of whom were being force fed with a hose snaked up their nose in order to insert Ensure directly to the stomach.

David H. Remes, a lawyer defending Guantánamo detainees pro bono, explained the hunger strike to a New York Times writer. Remes said that while it had been triggered by rough search and seizures of the Holy Qu'ran, in fact the deeper underlying cause was "their frustration at being held without trial going into their 11th year with no end in sight."

Wednesday night I discovered the poem by Adnan Latif, the 37-year-old Yemeni poet who committed suicide in his cell last September, its final stanza a mantra for the Guantánamo solidarity movement:

Where is the world to save us from torture?
Where is the world to save us from the fire and the darkness?
Where is the world to save the hunger strikers?

Holy Week was well chosen for the solidarity fast: Words from Psalm 22, which the lector read at Sunday mass, haunted me throughout the week: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish?

On Holy Thursday, the Washington Post ran a guest editorial by Thomas Wilner who was the lawyer in a 2008 case heard by the Supreme Court that established the right to habeas corpus for his client, a Guantánamo detainee. Wilner pointed out that fewer than 20 of the current prisoners were "high value." The others, he described as "low-level functionaries or people swept up and sold for bounties in the confusing initial stages of the fog of war in Afghanistan."

Reading Wilner's words on Holy Thursday, at least one connection was easy to draw: by midnight, even Jesus had been sold for 30 pieces of silver.

On Good Friday, I found the letter from Kenneth Roth, Director of Human Rights Watch, to Defense Secretary Charles Hagel, in which Roth addressed one of the most troublesome aspects of this ongoing scandal: "The indefinite detention of individuals without trial at Guantánamo has been in violation of international law. The lawful course for dealing with these detainees is to either prosecute them or release them."

He might have added the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., written from the Birmingham Jail 50 years ago this spring: "Justice too long delayed is justice denied."

Throughout my fast, I struggled with the notion of "solidarity." What can it mean if an act is undertaken invisibly, in solitude?

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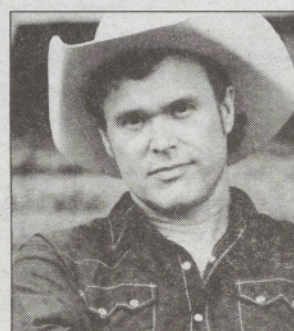
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