

Alleged '20th hijacker' claims torture

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SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico --

A Saudi suspected of being the "20th hijacker" in the Sept. 11 attacks has recanted his confession, saying he made false statements after he was beaten, abused and humiliated at Guantanamo, according to documents obtained Friday by The Associated Press.

Mohammed al-Qahtani - who U.S. officials have said previously was subjected to harsh treatment authorized by former Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld - denied knowledge of the Sept. 11 attacks in his first appearance before a military panel at Guantanamo Bay in October.

"I am a businessman, a peaceful man," al-Qahtani testified under oath, nearly five years after he was taken to the detention center in Cuba. "I have no connection to terrorism, violence or fighters."

The AP obtained a transcript of the hearing from the government under the Freedom of Information Act. This is the first extensive statement by al-Qahtani ever released.

An unidentified military officer at the hearing said the detainee admitted traveling in 2001 in Afghanistan, where he received terrorist training, met with Osama bin Laden and agreed to participate in a "martyr mission" for al-Qaida.

Al-Qahtani said the statements were not true and he only admitted to them while was being "tortured" at Guantanamo.

The alleged torture, which he details in a separate statement, included being beaten, restrained for long periods in uncomfortable positions, threatened with dogs, exposed to loud music and freezing temperatures and stripped nude in front of female personnel, he said.

"Once this torture stopped, I explained over and over that none of what I said was true," he told the Administrative Review Board panel, convened to determine whether he could be released.

"I have no intent to kill innocent people or anything like that," he said.

Al-Qahtani is one of the most notorious prisoners at Guantanamo, where the U.S. now holds about 340 men on suspicion of terrorism or links to al-Qaida or the Taliban.

The U.S. has alleged that al-Qahtani, who military records show is about 28, barely missed becoming the 20th hijacker on Sept. 11, 2001. The Saudi was denied entry into the country by immigration agents at the airport in Orlando, Florida.

At the time, he had more than \$2,400 in cash, no return plane ticket and lead hijacker Mohamed Atta was waiting for him, said Navy Cmdr. Jeffrey Gordon, a Pentagon spokesman.

"We think he is a dangerous terrorist," he said.

The U.S. treats detainees humanely and denounces the use of torture, Gordon said, but military investigators in 2005 concluded that al-Qahtani had been subjected to harsh treatment approved by Rumsfeld because he would not crack under interrogation.

The investigation led by Air Force Lt. Gen. Randall M. Schmidt confirmed, among other things, that al-Qahtani was forced to wear women's underwear, was threatened with dogs, and kept in solitary confinement for 160 days. At one point, he was interrogated for 18-20 hours per day on 48 of 54 days.

Schmidt concluded, however, that while the treatment was abusive it was within policy and not torture because he was not denied food, water or medical care, and interrogators did not inflict physical pain on him.

Al-Qahtani's lawyer, Gitanjali Gutierrez of the Center for Constitutional Rights, said the detainee told her in meetings that he planned to recant his confession - but this was his first chance to make any kind of official statement to U.S. authorities.

"It should be disturbing to anyone," she said.