

From Witness Against Torture

New York City — Three Christian activists from Witness Against Torture traveled to Bermuda on Friday, July 16, 2010 to meet with four Uyghur men who were detained in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba for more than seven years. (The Uyghur ethnic group primarily resides in western China.) The Bush administration conceded that the men are not “enemy combatants,” and in October 2008 a federal judge ordered their release. Eight months later, four Uyghurs were resettled in Bermuda. Other Uyghur detainees were resettled elsewhere while five Uyghurs remain in Guantánamo.

The purpose of the delegation to Bermuda is to build relationships with the Uyghurs, seek their counsel concerning further advocacy for both current and former Guantánamo prisoners, and to bring a message of atonement and reconciliation from the American people to the former prisoners. “In the United States, public discourse on Guantánamo is mainly informed by various perspectives from the military, politicians and the U.S. public,” says John Bambrick, a Chicago youth minister. “We have come to Bermuda to seek the perspectives of men who have experienced Guantánamo firsthand.”

“The Uyghur men in Bermuda, like us, are people of faith,” says Jeremy Kirk, a Ph.D. student in social ethics at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. “We are practicing our Christian faith by seeking connection with our Muslim brothers, in whose detention and abuse we have participated as U.S. taxpayers and citizens.”

On Saturday, the three activists visited the Uyghurs’ apartment, shared a meal and swam in the ocean with the former prisoners, and swapped stories about family and religious faith. The Uyghur men shared some of their experiences of being in Guantánamo and discussed their gratitude for and challenges associated with resettlement. (They are very grateful to the Bermudan Government’s support and hospitality.) On Sunday, the activists will speak with the Uyghurs in further detail about their experiences at Guantánamo and the conditions currently faced by the men who remain in detention. Luke Hansen, who is studying to become a Jesuit priest, states, “One of the many things that has impressed me in our conversations with these men, whom the Bush administration repeatedly labeled as the ‘worst of the worst,’ is their gentleness and compassion. While these men fiercely criticize the rationalizations behind their detention, they have expressed no resentment towards their captors, but rather have focused solely on the imperative to release the remaining Uyghur detainees at Guantánamo.”

The delegation to Bermuda included:

John Bambrick, 31, works as a Catholic youth minister in Chicago and is a member of the White Rose Catholic Worker. He earned his B.A. at Marquette University in 2001 and his M.A. in Pastoral Studies from Loyola University Chicago in 2008.

Luke Hansen, S.J., 28, is part of the Wisconsin Province of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits). In May, Luke earned an M.A. at Loyola University Chicago. His thesis is titled, "Countering Terrorism with Justice: A Catholic Response to Policies of Indefinite Detention in the Fight Against Terrorism."

Jeremy Kirk, 32, is a Ph.D. student in social ethics at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, where he studies interfaith response to crisis and liberation theology. He has worked as an organizer with various environmental and human rights groups.

All three are members of Witness Against Torture, a grassroots organization that formed in December 2005 when twenty-five activists walked to Guantánamo to visit the prisoners and protest torture policies. Since then, the group has engaged in public education, lobbying, demonstrations, and nonviolent civil disobedience.