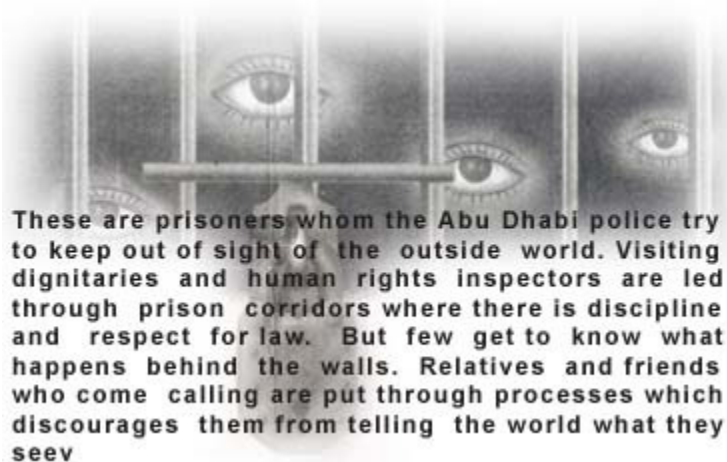


---

ARTICLE PUBLISHED IN THE SUNDAY PIONEER, MAY 17, 1998  
AS REPORTED BY SHALI ITTAMAN

---

**Many Indians are rotting in illegal confinement in the Al-Wathba Prison, United Arab Emirates. Shali Ittaman recounts the story in the words of those Released.**



Ex-inmates of the Al Wathba Central prison have some startling stories to relate. They say that the Jail in Abu-Dhabi has 10 clandestine blocks where nearly 2,000 people from the Third World countries are being held like medieval slaves, mostly for crimes they had never committed. Many of them are Indians. Some of them are women and some teenage boys. Almost all of them have been detainees for years.

George Titus Valliazam, a banker from Kerala, has been a prisoner in Al Wathba since 1986. For 12 years he has shared with nine other prisoners of a 10 by 10-nondescript cell. The block where his cell is located has 200 prisoners who are forced to live in inhuman conditions with rudimentary toilets and faulty plumbing.

Valliazam eats two coarse meals a day, wears a gunny jail jersey (rarely gets a change), does the laundry, sweeps the floor, cleans clogged toilets - and yet gets routinely flogged. Every night, he retires to his unventilated cell to sleep on the scorching floor. His wife and daughters, whom he left behind in Kerala. for the United Arab Emirates (UAE), still wait for him. They know he is languishing in Al Wathba but it is the truth they haven't told their neighbours.

Titus was arrested and sentenced to three years Imprisonment for allegedly defrauding the UAE Exchange, a high-profit company in Abu Dhabi in which he was a partner. But once you go behind the walls of Wathba you never know when you will come out, court orders notwithstanding.

Take the instance of Feorencio V Paruli. who hails from the Philippines. The UAE's Shariah Court declared him innocent in April 1995, but he hasn't known freedom three years after incarceration. In a letter to his friend, Paruli wrote "There is no evidence at all, not a single one...I'm still waiting for the golden paper from the

diwan (for the release). My life is wasting and my family is in great distress."

Nurulla Jan from Pakistan was falsely implicated in a drug offence and banished to Al Watbba in 1992. He continues to languish there despite being absolved and ordered to be set free by two courts in Abu Dhabi a month after his arrest.

Such examples abound in Al Wathba. These are prisoners whom the Abu Dhabi police try to keep out of sight of the outside world. Visiting dignitaries and human rights inspectors are led through prison corridors where there is discipline and respect for law. But not many get to know what happens behind the walls, or after they leave the premises.

Such is the secrecy that even letters from the prisoners are censured by jail officials. (Except the letters which are occasionally smuggled out.) Relatives and friends who come calling are also put through processes, which are intimidating and discouraging. Burly cops take turns to log close details, including work, address and names of sponsors of all visitors passing through the gates. In the visitors' gallery too, they have to jostle with a sea of humanity, duck a posse of guards and try to get the interns to describe what transpires in the prison cells before time out is called.

Only the hardiest and the most determined of the visitors put to peril liberty, job and family to beat the system and return repeatedly to learn more about the goings-on in Al Wathba and tell the world about them.

However, there are a few foreigners in high places in the UAE, including heads of missions, who have a stockpile of information on the barred cells. Over the years they have been flooded with petitions and letters from well wishers and relatives of the interns and even some released detainees, to intervene and end the plight of the prisoners. But owing to protocol limitations and economic compulsions, most of them have chosen silence. This is especially true of ambassadors from the Third World.

Recently, when this reporter met Mrs. George Titus in Ernakulam, she recounted that she had written several letters to the Indian Ambassador in Abu Dhabi and even met him once to seek help to secure her husband's release. But he cut his excuses and parted ways.

There are others who corroborate her account. Mohan Venghad, a one-time intern at Al Wathba, said that during his years in jail many of his well-wishers had seen the ambassador to request for his intervention. Venghad had himself secretly couriered a letter to the ambassador from the jail, detailing his and his fellow prisoners' condition. But nothing came of it, he spent another nine years in illegal detention.

He also says the embassy is merely an agency to issue work permits and check travel documents and the ambassador has only time "to suck up to the UAE officials, enjoy convivial feasts with them and lavish in their bequests."

Venghad has many horrifying accounts about prisoners who had shared berths with him at one time or the other. He mentions Aziz from Tamil Nadu, who, before his arrest and execution, worked as a driver of a rich and influential UAE citizen. He was falsely implicated in a murder case by his employer" and imprisoned for 12 years.

He was later ordered to be put before a firing squad. The Indian embassy was kept in the dark about the sentence until hours before the execution, leaving virtually no time for an appeal. After the execution, his body was disposed off secretly, never to be traced again. At that time, many in the jail, including Venghad, suspected that like the many ominous skeletons (of Filipino nurses) found in the desert' Aziz's bones too would be discovered one day.

The Indian embassy washed off its hand by saying that it was given no time to react but the moor question remains: Do Indian officials allow a few Indians to be sacrificed because of economic considerations?

This question is indeed equally applicable to the other Third World countries such as Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and the Philippines.

However. Talmiz Ahmad, joint secretary in the Ministry of External Affairs, says, when compared to the sheer numbers of Indians working in the UAE (about 1.2 million), such cases of miscarriages of justice are very few and far between. He says UAE is a very organized country and is perhaps more just and humane than most other countries in West Asia, where there is such a vast inflow of immigrants.

Whereas Ahmad does not discuss individual cases, he says that he has spoken to Indian ambassador to UAE Muralidhara Menon and the latter has denied having any knowledge of such secrets jails. He also says that Indian citizens in the UAE are well-cared for by the embassy and, without hampering foreign relations, it is doing everything in its power to safeguard its people's interests.

An Indian journalist (name withheld on request) who had spent many years in the UAE also says he knows nothing of the existence of such jails. He says his impressions of UAE society is vastly different, He is full of admiration for the system of law and justice existent there. He says "an average individual is far more safe in the UAE than he ever would be in India." (The Pioneer tried to get the UAE Interior Ministry's to react to the story. But it failed to respond to the fax.)

He says the Indian mission is working under severe limitations. He says many people who come to seek the help of the mission there have no proper travel papers. Because it is difficult to distinguish the nationality of people of the subcontinent, since they all look alike and speak the same tongue, lot of time is lost just in the exercise of identification.

Nevertheless, a perusal of the exemplary work done by the embassies of developed countries deepens one's anguish and remorse at the plight of the "nationals of the have-not countries".

Sample this. A British national committed the un- pardonable offence of assaulting a cop who caught him driving drunk.

The British embassy interceded on his behalf and the policemen who brought him to Al Wathba were severely reprimanded by their officers. He was kept in jail for exactly three hours.

Compare this with the case of a 15-year-old Pakistani boy, who has been behind bars for more than an year for stealing an apple.

### **Jabir Case - Justice on Trial**

The Sunday Pioneer May 17, 1998

For PK Jabir, Abu Dhabi had come to be his second home. In 18 years, he had set up the Ramla Electro-Mechanical Est. and the Premier General Contracting Est., two companies doing good business. Jabir had the reputation of being a rich man with a kindly heart.

Everything seemed to be going well with him until he met Hameed Saeed, a local Arab, and signed an agreement to lease a building. He had the least inkling then that he was signing his own destruction warrant.

That was on October 1, 1995. A year later, almost to the day, Jabir was forced on a plane to India with nothing but the grim reminder of an interim spent in Al Wathba.

Jabir's trouble began when he signed a contract for leasing 24 flats that Hameed owned. The contract was worth Dirhams 504,000 (Rs 50.4 lakh). According to the terms of the contract, the flats were to be handed over once an advance was paid to Hameed through cheque. The remaining amount was to be made with- in six months. After receiving the cheque, Hameed welshed the deal by refusing to let out the flats. Jabir then filed a civil suit and obtained an injunction on October 24, 1995, stopping Hameed from realizing the cheque.

Later, Hameed called in policemen to coerce Jabir to withdraw the suit, hand over the contract papers and give full payment for the flats. When an adamant Jabir refused, he was kicked and punched in the face and groin and his fingers were smashed with iron rods. His brother too was beaten. The arrogant policemen, however, committed the mistake of beating them in full view of the public. This proved to be their undoing. The brothers were then taken to the Asma police station where they were asked to sign documents", withdrawing the charge against Hameed. When they refused they were abused and assaulted again. Jabir fell unconscious; the brothers were eventually taken to hospital for X-rays.

Later, they were brought back to the jail, where they were held for 21 days. Then they were shifted to the A1 Wathba Central Prison, where they were kept in Block Number 10 - one of the secret jails for a week. Jabir was then released, though his brother was detained. Later, when he went to enquire about his brother, he was rearrested and packed off to the same cell to "join his brother."

In the meantime, a bail petition moved through a friend came up for hearing in the court on February 11, 1996. Several witnesses came forward to testify in Jabir's favour; a stockpile of evidence left the court no option but to reject the prosecution's counter-charge that Jabir had assaulted the cops during an inquiry. The court also granted them bail. Yet the brothers were not released. Later, after the final hearing of the case, the court on May 19, 1996, gave a verdict absolving Jabir of all charges and ordering the police to free his brother and him immediately. Yet their confinement continued.

Their days in prison were miserable. All their personal belongings were confiscated. They were tattered, given tattered jail suits to wear and confined to a cell with no beds, no ventilation and mostly no power. Food was of bad quality and inadequate. They were refused permission to receive or see visitors or write to relatives and friends. They were also made to work without rest and whipped and tortured for non-compliance.

On September 28, 1996, almost a year after their ordeal began, the Head of Security in the UAE Interior Ministry issued an order of deportation and they were taken out of prison and forced on a plane to India.

Though the order was in some ways a relief, it came too late and compensated Jabir too little. First, the grim memories of the days he spent as a prisoner were never again to be erased. Second, far from respecting the court verdict and admonishing the police for excesses, the Ministry ordered him to be deported after freezing all his assets created over 18 years.

Though there was ample proof of his innocence and of the atrocities committed on him, the Indian embassy did not help. The diplomats there sympathised with him and did nothing.

Back in India, he wrote to the secretaries of the External Affairs Ministry and the Home Ministry and to the National Human Rights Commission and later, filed a writ in the Supreme Court to coax these agencies to intercede on his behalf, punish his persecutors in Abu Dhabi and free his assets there.

On October 26, 1995. The Supreme Court took cognizance of the case but suggested that under the circumstances the High Court was a more appropriate forum to deal with the case.

Jabir then filed a petition in the High Court seeking an order for a Government of India intervention. The court gave the Government two months to take necessary steps. Unfortunately, the deadline is over, but the Government has still not moved.

### **Plush offices and torture chambers**

The Sunday Pioneer May 17, 1998

The Al Wathba Central Prison is a big facility spread over many acres. There are plush offices, reception area, staff quarters and well-kept jails for all to see.

However there is a compound which houses the torture chamber, the detention center and the execution arena. The compound is enclosed by huge steel girders and high walls and no outsider ever strays here.

In this compound there are 10 special blocks meant to detain the Third World country people and hard-core criminals. The prisoners here have no rights and are entirely at the mercy of policemen who guard them.

There are about 21 small cells resembling 'concrete cages' in each block where about 200 prisoners are held.

Prisoners are brought to these cells are tonsured, given two course jail suits, two blankets, a plastic cup and a plate each. All personal belongings, including clothes, are confiscated at the entrance and no other stationery is provided.

Hard-core criminals - even those against whom there are Black Warrants are given a better deal. They get toothbrushes, paper and pen. "Indian, Bangladeshi and Pakistani dogs." As the other detainees are called by the policemen, are never granted such luxuries. And only they are called for cleaning duties.

In the morning prisoners get a glass of tea, a slice of bread with a trickle of jam or a film of cheese. At lunch they are provided rice with a piece of camel meat. Dinner at 8'O clock is a slice of bread, dal (lentil) and a glass of black tea.

Prisoners in each block have six latrines and three bathrooms to use. Because the taps often run dry and the toilets are clogged most of the time, 200 prisoners more or less end up using one or two latrines.

Prisoners are regularly flogged on one pretext or the other and those resorting to hunger strikes are administered 10 "major flogs".

Medical facility too are extended to Arabs only. Other detainees who fall sick are left untreated. Power supply to the cells is controlled by guards on sentry duty. For weeks on end they turn off the power, leaving the prisoners to suffer in darkness.

---

---

THIS ARTICLE IS PUBLISHED WITH THE SUPPORT OF @

---

---

<http://www.uaeprison.com/myprisonlife.htm>

---

---

PUBLISHED BY THE 'LEGAL CELL' (LEGALCELL.COM) ON BEHALF OF  
'INVEST IN JUSTICE' ALLIANCE • 17 MAY, 1998

---

---