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PRESS RELEASE - 11/03/2015**Moazzam Begg**

On Wednesday 11th March, former Guantanamo Bay prisoner and activist Moazzam Begg addressed the Cambridge Union. He began his speech by pointing out how much has changed since he last spoke – when he was last here, he spoke largely about Guantanamo Bay, whereas today, he wished also to look forward.

He related the events of his detention, from being taken from his home shackled, with a gun to his head, questioned by the CIA in a detention centre in Pakistan, and then taken to Guantanamo Bay. At no point in his detention did he stand trial.

When he left the detention centre in Pakistan and was handed over to the Americans, Mr Begg felt hope – he believed that he was moving away from a place where human rights didn't matter, away from hearing prisoners being tortured with beatings. In Bagram, one prisoner was beaten to death for the amusement of American soldiers and another was beaten to death for trying to escape. He heard a woman's screaming in the next room, which he was made to believe was his wife.

Throughout all his time in detention, all the torture and dehumanisation, Mr Begg was never charged, nor told what he had supposedly done, though he was questioned repeatedly. Mr Begg reflected that this year, the 800th anniversary of the signing of the Magna Carta, we should consider how well it's terms are being upheld.

Mr Begg described something entirely unexpected that happened during his detention in Guantanamo Bay: "humanity". He recounted that, in solitary confinement, it was possible to get talking to soldiers and interrogators, and, shockingly, friendships developed. Mr Begg told the audience that he developed a friendship with one soldier that has lasted to this day, and also shared a touching story of a soldier wishing to bring him Cadbury's chocolate to remind him of home, and so brought him a Crème Egg (not realising he didn't even like them!). He explained that friendships like these were the reason he walked away from Guantanamo Bay not hating the people of the nations that had imprisoned him.

Mr Begg recounted that whilst he was detained in Bagram, the Americans were sending detainees to Syria and Egypt, and told the audience that the decision to go to war with Iraq, based on the false evidence given under torture that Iraq was working with Al-Qaeda, had a direct causal link to the real emergence of Al-Qaeda in Iraq. Mr Begg admitted that he himself has made mistakes, but these were errors of judgement. He explained to the audience that the British and American governments, however, have done enormous damage in the Middle East.

Following his arrest in the UK, Mr Begg was angry that he did not get to appear in court, as after all of the years he had spent in detention, he had never been able to defend himself, never been allowed to speak in court. He wants to see the government held accountable for what they are doing to the Muslim community, observing that the government are backing many Muslims into a corner and even pushing them to extremes.

Mr Begg spoke of the atrocities of war, of the horrors of innocent lives being lost, saying that this cannot continue and we must favour dialogue and discussion.

A question from the floor asked Mr Begg what can be done to improve this situation. He pointed out that terrorism charges are being taken too far: he criticises the arrests of people for writing poetry and sharing twelfth century manuscripts, the alarm bells that sound for teachers simply because a student is traditionally Muslim. He pointed out that the majority of terrorism is by non-Muslim organisations, and that targeting the Muslim community so specifically and stringently does not help. Mr Begg called for the audience to talk more, to get to know each other and defend those who are being targeted in our own community, as this will

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breed a culture of mutual help. In the longer term, he believes we need to lobby politicians, to make them accountable.

Mr Begg also criticised the fact that Islam is condemned for atrocities committed in Arab nations, when very few people protest the British government for its active support of Saudi Arabia.

When asked how he has coped, Mr Begg spoke movingly of the value of forgiveness, which his faith has helped him with. Despite everything he has been through, he can still find it within himself to forgive, and now his passion is fighting for justice for others.

Mr Begg said that he believes his father, organisations such as Amnesty International and activists protesting were responsible for his release. They relentlessly pressured the government to try him if he had committed a crime or to release him if he had not, and eventually he was released in 2005.

By Helen Dallas
Co-Head of Press, Lent 2015

