

US Holds Terror Suspect in Harsh Conditions-Lawyer

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By Christine Kearney

NEW YORK, Oct 21 (Reuters) - An American student who became the first person extradited to the United States from Britain on terrorism charges is being subjected to inhumane prison conditions, his lawyer argued on Tuesday.

Syed Hashmi, 28, arrested in June 2006 at London's Heathrow airport and extradited to New York, is being held in solitary confinement, including a 23-hour-a-day lock-down in his cell.

He is awaiting trial after pleading not guilty to supporting al Qaeda by holding items such as ponchos, raincoats and waterproof socks in his London apartment for use by al Qaeda fighters in Afghanistan.

Hashmi, also known as Fahad, faces up to 50 years in prison if convicted.

In a letter dated Tuesday, his lawyer asked U.S. Attorney General Michael Mukasey not to renew restrictions that include limited family visits and a ban on listening to broadcast news programs. The conditions are due to lapse next week.

"We are very concerned about the effects that complete isolation has on a person. This is sensory deprivation over an extended period of time," Hashmi's lawyer Sean Maher said in a telephone interview.

The letter was supported by two U.S. legal advocacy organizations that also wrote to Mukasey.

While it is not unusual for terrorism suspects in the United States to be held under such conditions, Maher said Hashmi's case was less serious.

"The allegation is he let someone stay in his apartment and that person had a suitcase with raincoats and ponchos. He is not alleged to be a member of al Qaeda," Maher said. "We are talking about socks here."

The U.S. Attorney's Office in Manhattan had no comment.

Prosecutors say the case against Hashmi is "extremely serious" and that he had been a member of Al-Muhajiroun, a defunct British-based Islamist extremist group.

They say Hashmi held the gear on behalf of his former friend turned government informant Mohammed Junaid Babar, knowing Babar was passing it and money on to senior al Qaeda commander Abdul Hadi al-Iraqi, who is now held at the U.S. military prison in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

Babar, the main informant, is cooperating with prosecutors after pleading guilty in New York in 2004 to smuggling money, night vision goggles and sleeping bags to al Qaeda.

Babar also testified as an informant against five Britons convicted in London in April of plotting bomb attacks on targets such as nightclubs and trains.

Hashmi, who moved to the United States from Pakistan at age 3, spoke at campus rallies at a Brooklyn college against U.S. policies. He moved to London in 2003 and received a master's degree in international relations from London Metropolitan University in 2005, his lawyer said.

Several parts of his court proceedings have been closed to the public and reporters after U.S. District Judge Loretta Preska ruled some of the evidence in the case was classified. (Editing by Michelle Nichols and John O'Callaghan)