

Victim of Abu Ghraib abuse

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The picture of the man in the hood standing with outstretched hands in the Abu Ghraib prison has become a symbol of American sadistic torture. *The Star* meets the man in the hood in an exclusive interview.

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PETALING JAYA: There is a good reason why the scholarly-looking Ali Shalah keeps his left hand close to his chest and tucked under the flowing robe he wears over his shirt and trousers.

His hand is badly deformed, scarred and twisted like the root of a tree. His last two fingers are blunt stumps.

He is quite self-conscious of the deformed hand and only shows it when asked. Then he pulls the cloak over it again.

It is a glaring reminder of the six months he spent in the notorious Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq.

Ali is the man in the hood. He is just 46, but looks much older.

Ali said he was the torture victim whom his American tormentors draped in a dark hood and cloak and forced to stand atop a concrete block with his arms spread out, crucifixion-like. Electrical wires hanging from both hands were attached to an electrical point.

Photographs of the degrading and brutal abuse in Abu Ghraib two years ago stunned and outraged the world.

It was not just a pose because Ali was electrocuted by American soldiers five times, often until he passed out.

"It feels like fire passing through your veins and you are blinded by flashes and your eyes feel like they are going to explode," he said, speaking through translator Dr Mahmoud Khalid, the former Iraqi ambassador to Malaysia.

Once when blood flowed from his



Haunting image: File picture of a hooded Ali that stunned the world — AP

mouth, a doctor was called in. But when it was found that the blood was from a bleeding tongue, the doctor said: "Continue with the torture."

Ali was a university lecturer in Baghdad when he was arrested due to his vocal criticism of the American invasion.

The electrocutions and his deformed hand, which was the result of soldiers stamping on it with their heavy boots, were just a small part of the torture that he went through.

Sexual abuse was a prevalent part of the prison torture. Ali speaks reticently about guns and broomsticks being thrust into "parts of my body."

"Men or women, they don't care. They do it to them," he said.

Men were stripped naked and made to serve meals to women detainees. If the women detainees averted their eyes, the men were beaten up.

His body is riddled with scars as a result of being kicked, stamped on and beaten with metal rods.

"They poked a rod into one of my bleeding wounds and twisted it around. Once they beat me until I was semi-conscious. I can still remember the song they were playing — *By the Rivers of Babylon*."

The worst were the screams of those being tortured around him.

"Men raped in front of women and women raped in front of men. Have you heard of the 'Black and Decker torture'? They used the power drill to make holes in your leg, arms, stomach and even in your eye.

Throughout his imprisonment, they demanded from him names of people who were a threat to the invasion forces.

One day, they piled him into a truck with others. He had no idea where they were heading until the truck stopped and he was pushed off onto the road. Only then did he realise he had been freed.

The 1.8m-tall Ali looked like a skeleton. He weighed only 40kg, less than half of the 95kg when he was taken in.

Ali is today the founder and co-ordinator of the Association of Victims of American Occupation Prisons.

He will be one of the speakers at an international conference-cum-exhibition entitled *Expose War Crimes: Criminalise War* to be held at the Putra World Trade Centre from Feb 5 to Feb 7.