

IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

ISA ALI ABDULLA ALMURBATI, <i>et al.</i>)	
)	
Petitioners,)	
)	
v.)	Civil Action No. 04-CV-1227 (RBW)
)	
GEORGE W. BUSH, <i>et al.</i> ,)	
)	
Respondents.)	

RESPONDENTS' OPPOSITION TO MOTION TO COMPEL

Petitioner's counsel's motion to compel, filed December 27, 2004, concerns the mailing from the U.S. Naval Base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, (GTMO) of a package of attorney notes taken by counsel during a recent visit to GTMO. Six packages of notes from the visit were mailed from GTMO to the offices of the Court Security Officers (CSOs) for the GTMO litigation in Washington, D.C.– five arrived without incident, one remains unaccounted for and is apparently lost in the mail. Extensive investigation and inquiry was undertaken by Department of Defense (DoD) personnel and respondents' counsel to attempt to track down the missing package, and remedial measures have been taken to ensure that all such packages in the future are sent using certified mail to permit tracking of the packages. In addition, steps have been taken to permit counsel visiting GTMO to fax their notes to the CSOs via secure means during the visit.

Petitioner's counsel seek an order imposing compensatory monetary sanctions on the government for expenses related to a future, return trip to GTMO to re-interview the detainee, Mr. Almurbati, to whom the missing notes pertained, including the costs of transportation, lodging, and meals for counsel and an interpreter for three nights and fees for the interpreter for

two days' travel time and two days' interpretation. That the package of notes is missing, hopefully only temporarily, is regrettable and of grave concern to respondents. Nonetheless, the relief requested by petitioner is problematic for several reasons, as explained herein. As an equitable matter, petitioner's counsel are not entitled to expenses for a stand-alone, return trip solely to re-interview Mr. Almurbati, when various counsel in these coordinated cases are regularly scheduling return trips to GTMO to interview their clients a second time. There is no reason why counsel in this case could not re-interview Mr. Almurbati on such an otherwise-to-be-scheduled trip. Moreover, the imposition of compensatory monetary sanctions such as those requested by counsel would violate sovereign immunity, as Congress has not waived the United States' immunity to such awards in this context.

Accordingly, petitioner's motion to compel should be denied.

BACKGROUND

Counsel for petitioners visited GTMO from October 25, 2004, through October 28, 2004. During this period, petitioner's counsel conducted interviews with the six detainees they represent in this action. At the conclusion of the visit, petitioner's counsel placed the notes taken during their meeting into six manila envelopes corresponding to each of the six detainees. Declaration of Matthew M. Diaz ¶ 5 (attached as Exhibit 1) ("Diaz Decl."). Petitioner's counsel and their military escort then signed their respective initials over the seal of each envelope and labeled the envelopes with the detainee's name as well as counsel's name and address. *Id.* The envelopes were placed in larger exterior envelopes (*i.e.*, double-wrapped) that were addressed to the offices of the CSOs for the GTMO litigation in Washington, D.C. *See* Amended Protective Order and Procedures for Counsel Access (filed Nov. 8, 2004) ("Amended Protective Order"),

Ex. A (“Counsel Access Procedures”) ¶ VI.B. After the envelopes were sealed, the military escort delivered them to a noncommissioned officer in charge of the detainee mail section at GTMO. *Id.* This officer subsequently hand-delivered the envelopes to the GTMO postal facility and deposited them for mailing to the CSOs. *Id.*

On or about November 12, 2004, counsel for respondents confirmed for petitioner’s counsel that their interview notes had arrived at the offices of the CSOs from GTMO. Declaration of Andrew I. Warden ¶ 2 (attached as Exhibit 2) (“Warden Decl.”). On November 16, 2004, petitioner’s counsel visited the secure work facility for habeas counsel to review their notes. During their visit, petitioner’s counsel learned that the CSOs received only five envelopes containing their notes. The CSOs informed petitioner’s counsel that the sixth envelope – notes taken during interviews with detainee Isa Ali Abdulla Almurbati – had not yet arrived at their offices. *See* Pet. Motion, Colangelo Decl.

On November 16, 2004, petitioner’s counsel informed respondents’ counsel of the situation regarding the sixth package of notes. *See* Warden Decl., Attachment. In light of the fact that these materials are considered presumptively classified pursuant to the Court’s Amended Protective Order, *see* Amended Protective Order, Ex. A ¶ IX.B., respondents’ counsel immediately made inquiries to the CSOs and GTMO personnel about the status of the sixth envelope. The ensuing investigation revealed that none of the six envelopes was sent via certified or registered mail, as they should have been. Diaz Decl. ¶ 5. Nevertheless, five packages, which were sent in the same fashion as the sixth package, arrived at the offices of the CSOs without incident and in a timely fashion. Based on this incongruity, along with the fact that the sixth envelope was not discovered following exhaustive searches of GTMO by

government personnel and of the secure habeas work space and offices of the CSOs by the CSOs, as well as inquiries by respondents' counsel to the United States Postal Service, one possible conclusion is the notes simply got lost in the mail from GTMO to Washington, D.C.

These facts make clear that, contrary to the assertion of petitioner's counsel, respondents did not lose or misplace counsel's notes while they were in their custody. If they were lost, they were lost by the Postal Service. Respondents remain hopeful that the sixth package of notes will arrive in the near future; indeed, the notes could arrive at any time.¹ Nevertheless, upon ascertaining that the package of notes were unaccounted for, respondents immediately implemented remedial measures applicable to all GTMO habeas cases that ensure attorney notes taken during future detainee interviews are timely and accurately delivered from GTMO to the CSOs. First, GTMO personnel will seal all attorney notes in envelopes in the visiting attorney's presence and record the number of pages contained in each envelope and the number of envelopes sent to the CSOs. Diaz Decl. ¶ 6. Second, every package of notes will be sent via certified mail, and copies of tracking receipts will be provided to visiting counsel. *Id.* Third, respondents have offered to make available a secure fax machine for the purpose of sending attorney notes directly to the CSOs or the habeas work space. *Id.* A secure fax machine will

¹In their motion, petitioner requests that respondents "produce an affidavit that details the chain of custody for the notes . . . and details all efforts Respondents have made to locate the notes." *See* Pet. Motion at 1. This request is unduly burdensome due to the large number of people who have played a role in the investigation of the handling of counsel's notes, including counsel for respondents, the CSOs, as well as personnel at DoD, GTMO, and the United States Postal Service. To be sure, all government personnel involved in the GTMO litigation are quite concerned with the whereabouts of potentially classified national security information and an extensive investigation commensurate with the obligation to safeguard this information has been performed. Moreover, as explained above, respondents in this Opposition have detailed the chain of custody from the conclusion of counsel's visit until the time the notes were delivered to the postal facility at GTMO.

allow counsel to confirm delivery of their notes with personnel based in the Washington, D.C., area following completion of the facsimile transmission, thereby ensuring that copies of the notes are available in the secure facility immediately following counsel's return from GTMO.² Once the problem associated with the sixth package of notes in this case was discovered, respondents quickly implemented these measures for all counsel visits occurring in December and beyond.

Furthermore, upon ascertaining the situation with respect to the sixth package of notes, respondents' counsel wrote to petitioner's counsel explaining the situation and offering to arrange – on a priority basis – a return visit to GTMO for petitioner's counsel and their translator. Respondents also offered to provide air transportation to GTMO for petitioner's counsel and their translator on government-chartered aircraft, free of charge, from Jacksonville, Florida, a point of origin for a regular, direct flight to GTMO for military and related personnel. *Id.*³ Petitioner's counsel responded to the government's offer by stating their intention to file the instant motion.

ARGUMENT

Petitioner's counsel requests that the Court impose sanctions against respondents in the form of compensation for all expenses related to a future, return trip to GTMO to re-interview Mr. Almurbati, including the costs of transportation, lodging, and meals for counsel and an interpreter for three nights, and fees for the interpreter for two days' travel time and two days' interpretation. As explained below, however, the compensatory monetary sanctions award

² Confirmation is possible because, when the secure fax is sent, qualified personnel from the CSOs or the habeas work space must be available on the other end of the fax to create a secure connection.

³ Commercial flights to GTMO normally originate in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida.

sought by petitioner's counsel is not only excessive and unwarranted under the circumstances, it is not permitted under principles of sovereign immunity.

I. SANCTIONS ARE NOT WARRANTED IN THIS MATTER.

Petitioner's counsel claim for sanctions in the form of compensation for all expenses related to a future, return trip to GTMO to re-interview Mr. Almurbati is not appropriate. The claim for such relief is premature, excessive, and otherwise not warranted as an equitable matter.

At the outset, it should be noted that the sixth package of notes is not, for a certainty, lost. Five packages, which were sent in the same fashion as the sixth package, arrived at the offices of the CSOs without incident and in a timely fashion, and the sixth package could arrive at any time. The delay in the arrival of the package is regrettable in the extreme, but it is not a foregone conclusion that the Postal Service will never deliver the package. If and when the notes arrive at the CSO offices, any claim for consequential compensation will be mooted.

Petitioner's counsel assert that an immediate return visit to GTMO is required and that the payment of compensation for such a trip is proper because the trip has been "necessitated by nothing other than Respondents' own negligence." Pet. Mot. at 2. But such an assertion is not supportable. For one thing, counsel's assertion, in effect, that a return trip is necessary because they can remember nothing from their multi-day interview of Mr. Almurbati sufficient to permit any factual investigation of petitioner's claims, *id.* at 7, seems unlikely. Further, counsel's assertion that a stand-alone, return trip for the sole purpose of re-interviewing Mr. Almurbati is absolutely necessary lacks support. Various counsel for the petitioners in these coordinated cases have undertaken or are scheduling return visits to GTMO to consult with their clients a second time. It is unclear why any re-interview of Mr. Almurbati could not take place in connection

with an otherwise scheduled return trip to GTMO for counsel for purposes of further consultation with the five other petitioners in this case.⁴ Such an arrangement would negate, at least in large measure, any claim for compensation of expenses.⁵

Other factors also make an award of monetary sanctions inappropriate in this matter. For one thing, it cannot be established that it was the actions of DoD, against which petitioner's counsel seeks sanctions, that caused the package of notes to be misrouted or misplaced by the Postal Service. As noted above, six packages were deposited with the Postal Service, and five arrived without incident. It is simply not known at this stage whether sending the sixth package by certified mail, as should have been done, would have prevented the loss of the package.

⁴ Counsel's insinuation that Privilege Team review of notes or other information will take an inordinate amount of time, Pet. Motion at 7, lacks a sufficient factual basis. While counsel asserts that review of the five packages of notes received took "nearly a month," he fails to note that the time schedule for such reviews runs from the date the Privilege Team receives the material, *see* Amended Protective Order, Ex. A ¶ VII.C.; that counsel requested review before it was confirmed that the packages had been received at the offices of the CSOs; and that the materials were not received by the Privilege Team for almost a week after counsel requested review, apparently due to logistical matters associated with the start-up of and transfer of materials to the secure facility in mid-November 2003. *See* Warden Decl. ¶¶ 3-4. Any subsequent delay appears to have been due to the transition of the materials from outgoing to incoming Privilege Team members, which currently consists of a DoD lawyer and intelligence personnel, as well as translators, as needed. Further, petitioner's counsel's reference to the time taken for "Privilege Team review of motion papers" submitted in *Habib*, *see* Pet. Motion at 7 n.4, is misleading: it conflates Privilege Team review, used for privileged material, with a separate process for classification review of court filings, which was involved, and recently completed, with respect to the motion papers in *Habib*. *Compare* Amended Protective Order ¶ 46 (filings forwarded to agencies for classification review) *with id.*, Ex. A ¶ VII.A. (Privilege Team review of information learned from detainee).

⁵ The overstated nature of petitioner's demand is all the more clear given that the Court has under submission a motion to dismiss, the resolution of which could terminate or significantly curtail further proceedings in these cases, including any in which information obtained from a detainee may be relevant. *See* Response to Petitions for Writ of Habeas Corpus and Motion to Dismiss or for Judgment as a Matter of Law (filed Oct. 4, 2004).

Further, the placement of counsel’s notes in ordinary instead of certified mail was not the result of a decision by DoD to consciously disregard the applicable procedures regarding mailing of presumptively classified information. Rather, it is apparent that this regrettable incident arose through mistake, misunderstanding, or lack of information. Petitioner’s counsel rail against what they call “litigation misconduct” by respondents, citing several cases affirming a court’s inherent authority to sanction such behavior. Pet. Motion at 6. However, there is simply no comparison between what investigation has indicated occurred here – the mistaken dispatch of mail for regular rather than certified carriage by personnel not otherwise involved in this litigation⁶ – and the type of flagrant and contumacious behavior by parties or attorneys that was at issue in the cases petitioner cites. *See Webb v. District of Columbia*, 146 F.3d 964 (D.C. Cir. 1998) (involving destruction of relevant personnel files during course of employment litigation); *Shepherd v. Am. Broad. Cos.*, 62 F.3d 1469 (D.C. Cir. 1995) (involving allegations of fraudulent alteration of key document, attempts to deceive the court, improper verification of interrogatory answers, and harassment of witnesses by outside counsel, although court of appeals reversed district court’s findings and imposition of sanctions because the allegations were not supported by the evidence); *Sacramona v. Bridgestone/Firestone, Inc.*, 106 F.3d 444, 446-47 (1st Cir. 1997) (involving spoliation of potentially dispositive evidence – automobile wheel that caused plaintiff’s personal injuries – while it was in the custody of plaintiff’s counsel or experts retained by him).⁷

⁶ *See* Diaz Decl. ¶ 5.

⁷ Petitioner also relies on two cases involving the court’s power to impose discovery-related sanctions pursuant to FED. R. CIV. P. 30(g) and 37 in specific types of circumstances (continued...)

Whatever the case, respondents have taken immediate remedial steps not only to ensure that the error is not repeated, but to permit counsel visiting GTMO, should they desire, to fax their notes directly to the CSOs, thereby providing assurance that the notes will be available at the secure habeas work facility upon counsel's return from GTMO. Plus, respondents have offered to provide partial transportation on government-chartered aircraft for a return trip for petitioner's counsel, reducing the cost of the trip.

All of these factors demonstrate that petitioner's counsel's claim for full compensation for a return trip to GTMO to re-interview Mr. Almurbati is inappropriate on the facts presented. The requested sanctions are not warranted as an equitable matter.

II. LEGAL AUTHORITY FOR THE IMPOSITION OF THE SANCTIONS SOUGHT BY PETITIONER'S COUNSEL IS LACKING.

Petitioner's counsel's demand for expenses is, in any event, barred by sovereign immunity. In making their demand, petitioner's counsel rely upon the Court's inherent authority to impose monetary sanctions for litigation misconduct, citing several cases, none of which involve sanctions imposed upon the federal government. *See supra* § I; Pet. Motion at 6. Monetary awards imposed against the United States, however, implicate the doctrine of sovereign immunity, and such awards are barred absent a specific waiver of that immunity. *See*

⁷(...continued)
defined in those rules (e.g., when counsel notices a deposition but fails to attend). Of course, discovery is not involved in the instant dispute, and these types of sanctions are plainly inapplicable. However, just as with the other cases cited by petitioners, what has occurred in this case is of a completely different order of magnitude compared to the sanctioned conduct of counsel in those two cases. *See West v. West*, 126 F.R.D. 82, 83 (N.D. Ga. 1989) (defendants noticed overseas depositions and then failed to follow through and hold them); *Starlight Int'l, Inc. v. Herlihy*, 186 F.R.D. 626, 635-40 (D. Kan. 1999) (breach of Rule 30(b)(6) by failing to prepare party representative, resulting in a virtually meaningless deposition).

United States v. Waksberg, 112 F.3d 1225, 1227(D.C. Cir. 1997) (“The judiciary may not impose monetary relief against the United States without its consent.”). Sovereign immunity “stands as an obstacle to virtually all direct assaults against the public fisc, save only those incursions from time to time authorized by Congress.” *United States v. Horn*, 29 F.3d 754, 761 (1st Cir. 1994). Waivers of sovereign immunity “must be unequivocally expressed in statutory text and will not be implied,” and are to be “strictly construed, in terms of . . . scope, in favor of the sovereign.” *Lane v. Pena*, 518 U.S. 187, 192 (1996); see *United States v. Nordic Village, Inc.*, 503 U.S. 30, 33-34, 37 (1992).

Though courts possess inherent power to impose sanctions in appropriate circumstances, courts have held that such power does not operate, as petitioner’s counsel would have it, without regard to the doctrine of sovereign immunity. Indeed, while the D.C. Circuit has not specifically ruled on the issue, a number of courts have held that a district court’s inherent power to impose sanctions does not include the authority to award compensatory relief against the government absent an express waiver of sovereign immunity. See *United States v. Waksberg*, 881 F. Supp. 36, 39-41 (D.D.C. 1995) (June Green, J.) (sovereign immunity bars compensatory contempt fine), *vacated on other grounds*, 112 F.3d 1225, 1227-1228 (D.C. Cir. 1997).⁸ See also *United States v. Horn*, 29 F.3d 754, 761-766 (1st Cir. 1994) (sovereign immunity applies as a bar to compensatory contempt sanction imposed under a court’s inherent power); *Coleman v. Espy*, 986 F.2d 1184, 1189-1192 (8th Cir. 1993) (no waiver of sovereign immunity found for civil

⁸ The D.C. Circuit declined to rule on the issue in the absence of proof of losses caused by the challenged conduct of the government, and remanded the case for that purpose. 112 F.3d at 1227-28. As argued *supra* § I, petitioners here have not definitely established losses or damages caused by the mailing incident at issue in this matter, thus supplying a ground upon which petitioner’s motion may be denied without reaching the sovereign immunity issue.

compensatory contempt sanction); *Barry v. Bowen*, 884 F.2d 442, 443-444 (9th Cir. 1989) (in the first of two alternative holdings, the court found nothing to suggest that the United States has waived its sovereign immunity with respect to monetary contempt sanctions).⁹ The First Circuit explained its holding that a court's inherent (or supervisory) power cannot be exercised without regard to sovereign immunity as follows:

The critical determinant is that the doctrines are of fundamentally different character: supervisory powers are discretionary and carefully circumscribed; sovereign immunity is mandatory and absolute. Consequently, whereas the former may be invoked in the absence of an applicable statute, the latter must be invoked in the absence of an applicable statute; and whereas the former may be tempered by a court to impose certain remedial measures and to withhold others, the latter must be applied mechanically, come what may. In other words, unlike the doctrine of supervisory power, the doctrine of sovereign immunity proceeds by fiat: if Congress has not waived the sovereign's immunity in a given context, the courts are obliged to honor that immunity.

Horn, 29 F.3d at 764. Accordingly, petitioner's counsel's appeal to the court's inherent power as authority for an award of monetary sanctions, without regard to sovereign immunity, must be rejected.

Furthermore, though petitioner does not raise them, other possible sources of a waiver of sovereign immunity do not apply in the context of petitioner's motion to compel. No waiver of sovereign immunity for monetary sanctions against the government exists under 18 U.S.C. § 401,

⁹ In *Cobell v. Norton*, 226 F. Supp. 2d 1, 154 & n.163 (D.D.C. 2002) (Lamberth, J.), vacated, 334 F.3d 1128 (D.C. Cir. 2003), the district court ordered the government to pay fees associated with the litigation of a contempt proceeding and stated, as one of several alternative rationales, that sovereign immunity did not prevent court from ordering such payment. The court, however, expressly declined to opine on the question whether sovereign immunity would serve as a bar to the imposition of compensatory monetary sanctions against the government for the violation of an injunction that served as a basis for the contempt finding. 226 F. Supp. 2d at 154 n.163. In any event, the D.C. Circuit ultimately vacated the underlying finding of contempt and the district court's decision.

which addresses the contempt powers of federal courts.¹⁰ See *Waksberg*, 881 F. Supp. at 39-40; *Horn*, 29 F.3d at 763-64 & n.11 (section 401 not “a vehicle powerful enough to overrun sovereign immunity”); *Coleman*, 986 F.2d at 1190-91 (nothing on face of § 401 “to suggest that Congress intended to waive sovereign immunity”).

Likewise, the waiver of sovereign immunity for fees and expenses contained in the Equal Access to Justice Act (EAJA), 28 U.S.C. § 2412(b), (d),¹¹ does not apply here because EAJA

¹⁰ 18 U.S.C. § 401 provides:

A court of the United States shall have power to punish by fine or imprisonment, or both, at its discretion, such contempt of its authority, and none other, as—

- (1) Misbehavior of any person in its presence or so near thereto as to obstruct the administration of justice;
- (2) Misbehavior of any of its officers in their official transactions;
- (3) Disobedience or resistance to its lawful writ, process, order, rule, decree, or command.

¹¹ Section 2412 provides, in part:

(b) Unless expressly prohibited by statute, a court may award reasonable fees and expenses of attorneys, in addition to the costs which may be awarded pursuant to subsection (a) [pertaining to judgments for costs pursuant to statute], to the prevailing party in any civil action brought by or against the United States or any agency or any official of the United States acting in his or her official capacity in any court having jurisdiction of such action. The United States shall be liable for such fees and expenses to the same extent that any other party would be liable under the common law or under the terms of any statute which specifically provides for such an award.

. . .

(d)(1)(A) Except as otherwise specifically provided by statute, a court shall award to a prevailing party other than the United States fees and other expenses . . . incurred by that party in any civil action (other than cases sounding in tort) . . . unless the court finds that the position of the United States was

(continued...)

does not apply in habeas cases,¹² and, even if it did, petitioner is not a “prevailing party” within the meaning of that statute. Petitioner has not obtained relief on the claims in this case, and even if petitioner could overcome the factors discussed *supra* demonstrating that the requested sanctions are not warranted in this matter, such a satellite victory unrelated to the merits would not bestow “prevailing party” status on petitioner for purposes of § 2412(b). See *Hanrahan v. Hampton*, 446 U.S. 754, 758-59 (1980) (procedural, evidentiary, or interlocutory ruling does not make party a prevailing party for purposes of recovering fees); *Grano v. Barry*, 783 F.2d 1104, 1108-10 (D.C. Cir. 1986) (prevailing party must obtain relief on merits of claim; construing 42 U.S.C. § 1988); see also *Role Models America, Inc. v. Brownlee* 353 F.3d 962, 965-66 (D.C. Cir. 2004).

And the waiver of sovereign immunity found in the Administrative Procedure Act, 5 U.S.C. § 702,¹³ offers petitioner no assistance because that statute does not waive immunity for petitioner’s claim for compensatory reimbursement, *i.e.*, damages. See generally *Dep’t of Army*

¹¹(...continued)
substantially justified or that special circumstances make an award unjust.

¹² See *Sloan v. Pugh*, 351 F.3d 1319, 1321-23 (10th Cir. 2003); *McCray v. Sec’y of the Air Force*, Civ. A. No. 84-1888, 1986 WL 7313 (D.D.C. Jun. 25, 1986) (recommendation of Dwyer, Mag. J.)

¹³ A person suffering legal wrong because of agency action, or adversely affected or aggrieved by agency action within the meaning of a relevant statute, is entitled to judicial review thereof. An action in a court of the United States seeking relief other than money damages and stating a claim that an agency or an officer or employee thereof acted or failed to act in an official capacity or under color of legal authority shall not be dismissed nor relief therein be denied on the ground that it is against the United States or that the United States is an indispensable party.

v. Blue Fox, Inc., 525 U.S. 255, 261-63 (1999) (“‘money damages,’ 5 U.S.C. § 702, we think, normally refers to a sum of money used as compensatory relief”).

In sum, no waiver of sovereign immunity exists permitting the monetary sanction relief sought by petitioner’s counsel, and the motion to compel must be denied.

CONCLUSION

For the foregoing reasons, the sanctions sought by petitioner’s counsel are neither warranted under the circumstances nor legally permissible. Petitioner’s counsel’s motion to compel, therefore, should be denied.

Dated: January 6, 2004

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