

Thousands of POWs held in appalling conditions in Afghanistan

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Thousands of captured Taliban fighters, many of whom have been detained since mid-November, continue to be held in terrible conditions in jails and makeshift prisons across Afghanistan. Access to the POWs is strictly limited but reports have begun to emerge of overcrowded and unsanitary conditions, lack of food and medical care and the use of torture.

According to a US spokesman in Pakistan, by late December about 7,000 Taliban prisoners were being detained. While the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has had access to the jails, it has only been able to register some 4,000 of the POWs. The organisation raised concerns over the conditions of detention after a prisoner fell ill and died last month at the Shibarghan jail in northern Afghanistan.

The prison built to house 800 holds nearly 3,500 POWs. Dozens of cases of dysentery have been reported. According to one account, “half a dozen men too weak to walk, one screaming with pain, were carried out of their cells to a clinic where medics set up intravenous drips.” Many were sick or wounded when they were transported to the jail over a month ago.

While US officials claim they bear no responsibility for the treatment meted out to the prisoners, the POWs are being held at Washington’s behest. As the Taliban regime collapse was underway in November, US Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld repeatedly insisted that there would be “no negotiated deals” and that foreign Taliban, in particular, would “either be killed or taken prisoner”.

Many of those held at the huge Shibarghan jail were taken prisoner after the fall of Kunduz. They include survivors of the US-led massacre of hundreds of POWs inside the Qala-i-Janghi prison near Mazar-e-Sharif in late November. Shibarghan is the base of the notorious Uzbek warlord General Abdul Rashid Dostum who was

in charge of the surrender of Kunduz and the thousands of captured Taliban.

Many of the prisoners were transported to Shibarghan in sealed metal containers. According to a witness cited in the *New York Times*, troops opened fire on some of the containers as the convoy halted overnight at Qala Zeina outside the city of Mazar-e-Sharif. The source said he had seen “three or four bullet-ridden containers and blood running from them.” Even Dostum’s own intelligence chief Usman Khan admits that 43 died en route either of asphyxiation or wounds.

According to Afghan authorities, any delay in releasing the POWs was due to US demands to interrogate the prisoners. Teams of CIA, FBI and other US officials have been engaged in systematically grilling the thousands of Taliban held in Afghanistan and also Pakistan to identify those to be interrogated further. The procedure openly flouts the Geneva Convention, which provides that POWs are obliged to give only their name, rank, date of birth and serial number.

The Bush administration tacitly admits its breach of international law by referring to the prisoners only as “detainees” not as “POWs,” who would have rights prescribed under the Geneva Convention. The term, however, only begs the obvious question—if the “detainees” are not being held under the Geneva Convention then on what basis are they being imprisoned?

The Bush administration deliberately blurs any distinction between the Taliban and Osama bin Laden’s Al Qaeda network. By implicitly branding all POWs as “terrorists,” Washington seeks to justify the abrogation of even the basic rights granted to the prisoners under the Geneva Convention. But many of the foreign Taliban held in detention are anything but

hardened Al Qaeda members as a series of interviews with prisoners at Shibarghan published in the *New York Times* makes clear:

* Muhammad Ibrahim, 22, was a Moroccan who lived with his family in Italy. He came to Afghanistan five months ago at the suggestion of a friend. He spent a month in Kabul before being sent to Kunduz. “I just sat on the front line—I did not fight for three months. There was nothing much else to do. I just came here because I had a problem with my family. There is nothing to say about the Taliban. In the end they were a big catastrophe.”

* Abdul Salam, 17, who worked in a store in Saudi Arabia, came with a friend to Afghanistan to take part in the holy war. “I was here only two months, one month in Kabul and one month in Kunduz,” he said, adding that he never did any real fighting before being captured.

* Tursam, 30, a Muslim Uighur from the Chinese province of Xinjiang, said he had come to Afghanistan to settle but had been forced to join a unit of fighters from Uzbekistan. “I did not come here to fight but the Taliban took us to Kunduz to fight... When they captured me, the soldiers said I would be handed back to China. They will shoot me in China. What can I do?”

The US denies using torture to extract information from the POWs. But the US interrogators are working in tandem with their Afghan allies who have no such qualms. Abdul Qayum, the governor of one of Kabul’s 22 detention centres, baldly declared to the *Guardian* newspaper: “At first we use Islamic and humanitarian behaviour towards them [the prisoners] to get confessions and if that doesn’t work then we use physical force.” That they possessed guns and not passports or identity documents was proof of Al Qaeda membership, Qayum said, but the confessions were needed to clinch their guilt.

A Northern Alliance soldier, Aghai Gul, in charge of a checkpoint on the northern outskirts of Kabul had kept one prisoner locked in a metal container for four weeks. Mahammed Rahim, 40, had been arrested in the capital for allegedly helping the Taliban and kicked, punched and hit with a stick. “They beat me so much they had to take me to the hospital, then they took me here. I’m still sick but they won’t bring me a doctor,” he said. Gul openly admitted the use of violence. “Of course we beat him; sometimes it is the only way to get

the truth out of them.”

Neither US nor Afghan officials will say what the fate of the POWs will be. To date, 339 POWs have been singled out and handed over to the US military, which is holding most of them at a makeshift prison at near Kandahar airport. According to the Pentagon, the first group of about 100 prisoners are to be flown to the US naval base at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba where they will be held in complete isolation. None of them have been charged with any crime.

The future of those who remain in Afghanistan is just as uncertain. General Dostum said that he would not free any Taliban prisoners under his control at the Shibarghan jail until he had determined whether they had committed any crimes.

The US-based Human Rights Watch has already raised concerns that Islamic militants who are returned to countries such as Russia, China, Egypt and Saudi Arabia will face torture and possible execution. In a statement last month, the organisation noted that the Convention against Torture, to which both the US and Afghanistan are signatories, specifically prohibits persons from being expelled to a country where there are substantial grounds for believing they will be subject to torture.

General Dostum has already forcibly returned at least 10 Uzbek prisoners to neighbouring Uzbekistan at the insistence of its president Islam Karimov. The prisoners, who are allegedly members of the outlawed Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, had said that they faced almost certain death at Karimov’s hands and wanted to seek political asylum in Afghanistan. While Dostum apparently did not bother to consult the interim government in Kabul, it is inconceivable that his decision did not have the approval of the US military which had been interrogating the prisoners.



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