

Detainee dies during US interrogation in Afghanistan

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US authorities last week reported that one of the detainees being held by the military for interrogation at the Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan had died. Almost nothing is known about who he was, why he was detained or the circumstances surrounding his death.

A terse official statement explained that the man was in his 30s and had been captured in Afghanistan during the previous week. He died, allegedly from natural causes, at around 1 pm on December 4 after being taken to the base hospital. “The matter will be fully investigated,” the statement added.

Citing US military regulations, spokesman Colonel Roger King refused to release the prisoner’s name, hometown or nationality, or to state the reasons for his detention. It is not even clear whether the man’s family and friends have been notified of his death.

A *New York Times* report noted: “The man was among those Taliban and Al Qaeda suspects held in a large warehouse on the base while undergoing interrogation. The detention building has remained off limits to journalists, but released detainees have described being held in barbed-wire pens inside the large building, under constant electric light. Some have complained of beatings or injuries received when they were captured.”

Neither the *New York Times* nor other media outlets have raised any questions about the death or criticised the treatment being meted out to alleged terrorist suspects, in breach of their most basic democratic rights. A man can be detained indefinitely without charge and die in unexplained circumstances—and the media, including the so-called liberal *New York Times*, passes over the matter in silence.

There are only a limited number of possibilities. In normal circumstances, young men do not suddenly die. The detainee may have been sick, injured or

wounded—either before or during his capture—in which case he should have been taken to hospital, not an interrogation centre. Or he may have fallen ill, and, likewise, been given proper medical treatment. The only other possibility is that the interrogation itself contributed directly to his death. Whichever is the case, serious questions of gross negligence and/or mistreatment are raised.

Some idea of what happened can be gauged from what is known about US interrogation methods. The most detailed account emerged during the trial of John Walker Lindh—the so-called American Taliban—who was detained following the Taliban’s surrender of the northern city of Kunduz last November. He survived the massacre of Taliban prisoners at Qala-i-Jangi fortress outside Mazar-i-Sharif and was then flown to the US base dubbed Camp Rhino near Kandahar in southern Afghanistan for interrogation.

Lindh was subject to continual verbal abuse and taunts as well as death threats. He was malnourished, sick and had a bullet wound in his leg. He was deliberately kept in this state until he agreed to answer questions. During the first two days of his detention in Camp Rhino, he was blindfolded, stripped naked, bound to a stretcher and then placed inside a metal shipping container without heating or insulation. He received only limited food and medical attention. Only after his interrogation was he transferred to the USS Peleliu, where he was treated for dehydration, hypothermia and frostbite, and the bullet removed from his leg—more than a fortnight after his initial capture.

At no stage was Lindh advised of his legal rights or informed that his parents had retained a lawyer on his behalf. The treatment of Lindh, as well as that of the hundreds of men currently imprisoned as Taliban or Al Qaeda suspects in Afghanistan and at Guantanamo Bay

in Cuba, is in open breach of Geneva Convention rules for the detention of prisoners of war.

More than 600 detainees have been held and interrogated without charge at Guantanamo Bay for nearly a year. Only four prisoners have been released—three Afghans and a Pakistani in late October. US authorities admitted that they were not dangerous or linked to any terrorist group. Two of the four were in their 70s. The men complained that they were kept locked in tiny cells in sweltering heat and underwent lengthy interrogations. They had no contact with their families until shortly before their release.

It appears, however, that the interrogation regime at Bagram Air Base is even more aggressive. According to an October 29 article in the *Washington Post*, “Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, is losing its usefulness as a place for gathering valuable intelligence information, while interrogations at the US military base at Bagram, and elsewhere abroad, have proven more fruitful...”

“Because Guantanamo is so close to the United States and is continually being visited by US and foreign officials, informed sources said, the camp operates in more of an atmosphere of ‘political correctness’ than does the Bagram facility—a sense among interrogators that they must not allow detainees an opening to complain of mistreatment.”

At Bagram, which operates in “more of a frontier atmosphere”, interrogators feel no such constraint. The military insists it operates within rules that ban the use of physical and mental torture, drugs and the exposure to inhumane treatment. But no one is permitted inside the facility. Other than an occasional visit by the international Red Cross, there is no check on the treatment of prisoners.

Moreover, as interrogators candidly admit, one of the techniques employed is to threaten detainees with being handed over to Afghan authorities or to third countries where physical torture is used without qualms. As the *World Socialist Web Site* reported in March, prisoners have already been shipped to Egypt and Jordan where they have been brutalised by local torturers operating under CIA supervision.

Similar methods are being used in Kabul, just 60 km from Bagram. A report by journalist Robert Fisk in the *Independent* in August cited a military source who explained that the CIA was employing Afghan soldiers based in a former torture centre in Kabul to carry out

their dirty work. “It’s the Afghan Special Forces who beat the Pashtun prisoners for information now—not the Americans. But the CIA are there during the beatings, so the Americans are culpable, they let it happen,” the source said.

Bagram, which reportedly has a capacity of 40 to 80 detainees, has clearly become a key processing centre for US interrogation. Suspects seized in other countries are being flown to Afghanistan, not Cuba. A further report by Fisk in the *Independent* described how FBI agents working with local police seized three men in Pakistan in May and June—including a doctor and a teacher—and detained them indefinitely without informing their families of their whereabouts.

The newspaper located one of them. “He is a prisoner in a cage on the huge American air base at Bagram in Afghanistan. He was kidnapped—there appears to be no other word for it—by the Americans and simply flown over the international frontier from Pakistan. His ‘crime’ is unknown. He has no lawyers to defend him. In the vacuum of the US ‘war on terror’, Mr Abdul Qadir has become a non-person.”

In June, suspected Al Qaeda member Omar al Faruq was detained by Indonesian intelligence agents, handed over to the CIA and flown to Bagram for interrogation. Classified documents leaked to *Time* magazine explain that he “was subjected to three months of psychological interrogation tactics—a US counterintelligence official says they included isolation and sleep deprivation” before he finally “broke down” and allegedly provided details of Al Qaeda operations in South East Asia.

Just who the detainee was who died last week at Bagram and what ordeals he suffered remains a matter of speculation. More information may be forthcoming. What is certain, however, is that the Bush administration and the US intelligence apparatus are responsible for depriving him of his freedom and basic democratic rights, and subjecting him to a system of interrogation, and possibly torture, that, at the very least, appears to have directly contributed to his death.



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