

New account of US torture of Afghan and Arab prisoners

Patrick Martin
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A leading US newspaper published an extensive account December 26 of the methods used by the Central Intelligence Agency in interrogating prisoners captured in Afghanistan. The techniques employed—mainly at a top security facility inside Bagram air base outside Kabul—include many which are classified as torture by international human rights groups.

The front-page report in the *Washington Post* informed readers in the US capital of the fate of captured Afghan and Arab prisoners of war, invariably described as Taliban and Al Qaeda operatives, in the hands of the CIA:

“Those who refuse to cooperate inside this secret CIA interrogation center are sometimes kept standing or kneeling for hours, in black hoods or spray-painted goggles, according to intelligence specialists familiar with CIA interrogation methods. At times they are held in awkward, painful positions or deprived of sleep with a 24-hour bombardment of lights—subject to what are known as ‘stress and duress’ techniques.”

The actual methods are likely far worse than those detailed by the US newspaper. Two weeks ago US authorities reported that two detainees at Bagram had died while being held for interrogation. Natural causes were cited, but the suspicion remains that the two, both relatively young and apparently healthy, had died under torture or because wounds received during capture were not properly treated. [See “Detainee dies during US interrogation in Afghanistan”]

Those who cooperate receive better treatment and occasionally bribes. Those who continue to resist may be transferred to the custody of foreign intelligence services, including those of Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Morocco, which regularly engage in more extreme forms of physical torture. This practice, known

in CIA parlance as “rendering,” is a violation of international and US law, but was authorized under the Clinton administration and greatly expanded by the Bush administration after September 11. [See “US oversees abduction, torture, execution of alleged terrorists”]

The two *Post* reporters, Dana Priest and Barton Gellman, interviewed a dozen former and current US national security officials, including several who had witnessed the handling of prisoners, and who defended the use of violence in interrogation as “just and necessary.” The CIA declined any official comment on the subject, but the head of the CIA Counterterrorist Center, Cofer Black, told a September 26 joint session of the House and Senate intelligence committees that in dealing with suspected terrorists “after 9/11 the gloves come off.”

Some comments cited by the *Post* show the gangster mentality which now predominates in official Washington. One official said, “If you don’t violate someone’s human rights some of the time, you probably aren’t doing your job... I don’t think we want to be promoting a view of zero tolerance on this. That was the whole problem for a long time with the CIA.” Another told the reporters, “our guys may kick them around a little bit,” while a third, referring to providing medical treatment to wounded prisoners, said, “pain control is a very subjective thing.”

Afghan and alleged Al Qaeda prisoners are held not only at Bagram, but at US facilities on Diego Garcia, a British-controlled island in the Indian Ocean, and at other undisclosed locations. While considerable publicity has been given to the presence of 625 prisoners at a US-run prison at Guantanamo Bay naval base in Cuba, this represents only a fraction of the 3,000 people seized worldwide since September 11,

2001. According to the *Post*, fewer than 100 of these have been “rendered” to third countries, leaving well over 2,000 prisoners unaccounted for—either still held in secret US-controlled or third-country prisons, or killed outright by their captors.

Only one prisoner was named as a torture victim in the *Post* account—Abu Zubaida, a leading member of Al Qaeda, who was shot during his apprehension in Pakistan last March, then denied medical treatment as a means of forcing his cooperation. “National security officials suggested that Zubaida’s painkillers were used selectively in the beginning of his captivity. He is now said to be cooperating,” the newspaper reported.

Another prisoner, Mohammed Haydar Zammar, who holds joint German and Syrian citizenship, was “rendered” to Syria, where he is believed to have been tortured. German officials strongly protested Zammar’s transfer to Syrian custody, asking that he be returned to Germany for questioning about possible links to the September 11 suicide hijackings. Syria has provided information from his interrogation to the US government.

The CIA interrogation centers are not subject to any independent review. Red Cross officials are not allowed access to the prisoners, and even their names are held secret. The prisoners may not correspond or have any contact with the outside world. For all practical purposes they have “disappeared,” like the victims of the Latin American death squads which the CIA financed and organized in the 1970s and 1980s.

The methods admittedly employed by CIA interrogators have been condemned, not only by human rights organizations, but by the US State Department, when used by other countries. The 2001 State Department human rights report classified sleep deprivation and forcing prisoners to stand for long periods as forms of torture, and criticized these methods when used by Jordan, one of the countries which the CIA favors for “rendering” prisoners.

The cynicism of the US government’s attitude was summed up by Frederick Hitz, former CIA inspector general, who discussed the issue with the *Post*. “We don’t do torture, and we can’t countenance torture in terms of we can’t know of it,” he said. But if a country offers the US information gleaned from torture, “we can use the fruits of it.”

In an editorial published the following day, the *Post*

noted the “eye-opening” character of its report on the use of torture by the CIA, but offered only a mealy-mouthed criticism of the practice, concluding that the Bush administration would be well-advised to declare publicly to the American people what methods it is employing in the interrogation of prisoners: “If administration officials have decided that moderate physical pressure—once an abuse—is now to be the norm in terrorism cases, the American people ought to know and ought to be able to respond through their representatives and through individual and organizational voices. It shouldn’t be the administration’s unilateral call.”

On December 27, the New York-based Human Rights Watch sent a letter to the White House calling for an investigation of the torture allegations. The group said that the methods reported by the *Post* “would place the United States in violation of some of the most fundamental prohibitions of international human rights law.” US officials could face charges for violation of the Geneva Conventions, not only before an international tribunal, but “in any national criminal court.” The transfer of prisoners to the jurisdiction of third countries, knowing they would be tortured there, was also a violation of international law, the letter said.

The Bush administration has not yet commented in any way on the *Post* report on the Human Rights Watch letter, except to reaffirm its longstanding posture that prisoners of war are entitled to treatment under the Geneva Conventions, while suspected terrorists are not. The American media as a whole has remained silent on the subject, making no reference to the *Post* report or any editorial comment on it. While the British Broadcasting Corporation reported the *Post* story, no American television network has done so.



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