

US tortures two detainees to death in Afghanistan

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New evidence has emerged that the US military has tortured to death at least two of the detainees held at its special interrogation centre at the Bagram Air Base, just north of the Afghan capital, Kabul. At any one time, up to 100 prisoners are being held without charge at the base and subjected to various forms of humiliation, disorientation and physical hardship in order to break their resistance to questioning.

The deaths of the two young men took place last December, but were brushed off by US spokesmen as being due to natural causes. No details—not even the names and hometowns of the two detainees—were released. Assurances were offered that the circumstances of their deaths would be fully investigated, but after two months, the incidents were all but officially buried.

However, an article in the *New York Times* on Tuesday revealed that the deaths were not from natural causes. The journalist tracked down the relatives of one of the two men, Dilawar, a 22-year-old farmer and part-time taxi driver, to a small village in eastern Afghanistan, where his elder brother produced a copy of Dilawar's death certificate. It was handed to the family along with the body on January 17, but no one understood its contents.

According to the document, dated December 13, Dilawar had been found "unresponsive in his cell while in custody". He died as a result of "blunt force injuries to the lower extremities complicating coronary artery disease". In the section dealing with "mode of death", four alternatives were listed: natural, accident, suicide and homicide. The box for homicide was marked.

US officials have since confirmed the authenticity of the document, which was signed by one of the army's own specialist pathologists. Military spokesman Colonel Roger King admitted that the death of Mullah

Habibullah on December 3 was also attributed to a blunt force injury, in addition to a blood clot in the lung. Habibullah was aged about 30, from the southern province of Oruzgan. The US military has told his family nothing about his death, which they learned about through the International Red Cross.

King said the deaths were the subject of ongoing investigations and provided no further details. He spoke dismissively of the death certificates, declaring: "It still doesn't mean it is necessarily a criminal act. Criminal homicide is dependent on intent." His comments are a cynical evasion. At the very least the treatment meted out to the two men, as well as the lack of any regard for their underlying medical conditions, constitutes gross criminal negligence in any court of law.

Moreover, King's concern for the letter of the law in relation to the US interrogators stands in complete contrast to the flagrant abuse of their victims' democratic rights. Dilawar, who had a wife and two-year-old daughter, was detained when his taxi was stopped by Afghan guards near a US base at the town of Khost. His two passengers—a local village policeman and another villager—were also seized and are still being held in custody without charge.

The *New York Times* spoke to several men who saw Dilawar during his detention at Bagram. They describe a large hangar, divided into two floors, with isolation and interrogation cells on the upper floor and a larger holding area on the ground level. Abdul Jabar and Hakkim Shah said that they were held upstairs for two weeks—hooded, naked, their arms raised and chained to the ceiling and their feet shackled. They were only released to eat, pray, go to the toilet and for daily interrogation. The guards kept them awake by shouting or kicking them.

Jabar remembered seeing Dilawar, hooded, being led

down downstairs to the bathroom. “I asked who he was because he seemed to be struggling a lot,” he said. Dilawar seemed to be having difficulty breathing and lay on the ground when released from his chains. “He was scared because he could not get enough oxygen,” Jabar said.

Shah said he saw Dilawar when he was made to sweep the downstairs room. “He did not look healthy. His face was a dark colour. His feet were chained so he could not move well. He was looking very worried.” During his own ordeal, Shah’s legs had become so swollen that the shackles around his ankles stopped the flow of blood. He was finally permitted to sit, but when the shackles were finally removed he could not feel or move his feet.

US officials have admitted to some of the “stress and duress” techniques used on detainees, but baldly deny that the treatment amounts to torture. “We feed them a balanced diet, see to the fact that they are kept out of the weather—they live in a building, I live in a tent. We do our best to treat them in a humane fashion,” King declared, adding that the US followed international conventions.

His remarks simply underscore the contempt of the Bush administration and the US military for international agreements and democratic rights. The hundreds of detainees at Bagram, Guantanamo Bay in Cuba and elsewhere are being held and interrogated in violation of their basic rights—in the case of combatants, under the Geneva Convention. Even what is known of the methods used at Bagram violates the UN anti-torture convention that was ratified by the US Congress in 1994. An associated law made torture committed in the US, or by an American anywhere, a felony punishable by 20 years jail. Torture resulting in death could bring the death penalty.

Amnesty International recently stated: “Despite claims to the contrary by US officials, the use of sensory deprivation (hooding), prolonged physical restraint (shackling) and denial of medical care are all characteristic elements of torture, and, like psychological torture, are prohibited under international law... Interrogators at work in Guantanamo or Afghanistan should not be misled about what constitutes torture and should uphold their duty to refuse to use techniques that constitute torture. Deaths in custody and suicide attempts raise grave doubts

about conditions of detention and methods of interrogation that are not only beyond the pale, but also beyond the law.”

There is no reason to believe, however, that the treatment meted out at Bagram is limited to “torture-lite” as the “stress and duress” techniques are disparagingly referred to in US intelligence circles. Commenting on the recent capture of alleged Al Qaeda leader Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, a US official noted that the UN anti-torture convention has no enforcement mechanism, so, “you’re just limited by your imagination.” A US intelligence official told Associated Press that in addition to the acknowledged methods, authorities at Guantanamo Bay allow “a little bit of smacky-face” as “some Al Qaeda just need some extra encouragement.”

Democrat Senator John Rockefeller IV suggested that Mohammed be handed over to a third country where torture is not illegal—a practice known as “rendition” that has been covertly used by the CIA in the past. “I wouldn’t rule it out,” he said. “I wouldn’t take anything off the table where he is concerned, because this is the man who has killed hundreds and hundreds of Americans over the last 10 years.”

Rockefeller’s comments simply highlight the fact that since the September 11 attacks, the Bush administration, whatever the public denials, is condoning the use of torture by the military and CIA. Unsubstantiated allegations against figures like Mohammed are being exploited to create a climate for the arrest, torture and indefinite detention of hundreds of people who have never been charged or brought before a court.

In the case of the young taxi-driver Dilawar and villager Mullah Habibullah, the US military is directly responsible for their deaths—a crime for which American authorities are unlikely to hold anyone accountable.



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