

Another detainee dies in US custody in Afghanistan

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US military authorities reported last week that a man detained in Afghanistan had died on June 21. In a brief statement, media spokesman Colonel Rodney Davis reported that the Afghan detainee died while imprisoned at a US “holding facility” near Asadabad in the eastern province of Konar.

Military authorities refused to release any information on the deceased man’s identity, or on any of the circumstances surrounding his death. “The man was taken under control June 18 [and] transported to the holding facility at a security compound, where he stayed until his death,” the statement read. “The man’s death is under investigation.” No explanation was given as to why the man was detained or the conditions under which he was held.

The military’s efforts to bury the story of the highly suspicious death have been assisted by the media’s complete lack of interest. Apart from brief stories by Associated Press and the *Washington Post*, the unexplained death of an unnamed prisoner, arrested without charge and denied access to a lawyer, has been passed over in silence. No one has asked what happened between the man’s capture on June 18 and his death three days later.

While it remains possible that the man died of natural causes, it is the least likely of the alternatives. The vast majority of the people detained in Afghanistan have been young men. If this prisoner was suffering from a serious illness or injury or was wounded during his capture, then the US military is criminally negligent. The man should have been receiving treatment in a hospital rather than being held in a military facility.

The only other possible explanation for the man’s death is that he died as a result of the interrogation techniques used by the US military and the CIA. If this were indeed the case, this man would not have been the

first person to be tortured to death by US interrogators in Afghanistan. Moreover, it would explain the reluctance of the military authorities to provide even the most elementary facts concerning the dead man.

In separate incidents last December, two other men died while being interrogated by US personnel in the Bagram air base, headquarters for US forces in Afghanistan. While the military initially claimed that the men had died of natural causes, its own pathologists subsequently revealed that both men had suffered blunt force trauma and classified the deaths as homicides. More than six months after these deaths the official investigation is still being dragged out.

The torture of hundreds of detainees has been a common US practice in the “war on terror” in Afghanistan. Military and intelligence officials have openly admitted to depriving prisoners of sleep, shackling detainees for extended periods, selectively withholding medical treatment, and forcing prisoners to stand in painful positions for hours at a time.

The Bush administration denies that this treatment constitutes torture, and insists that “stress and duress” techniques are legitimate interrogation techniques. Human rights groups and authorities on international law have refuted this claim. The US treatment of prisoners that is defended by military and intelligence officials is actually illegal under the UN anti-torture convention as ratified by the US Congress in 1994.

Washington’s complete disregard for most basic democratic rights of detainees ensures that US interrogators can act with complete impunity. Men detained in Afghanistan are routinely classified as “enemy combatants” and, as such, denied all access to legal counsel or even contact with their families and friends.

In these conditions, the treatment of detainees under

interrogation goes beyond what is cynically referred to as “torture-lite” in US intelligence circles. There is a mounting body of evidence demonstrating that US officials use physical violence while interrogating prisoners. Earlier this year, a US intelligence official told Associated Press that on top of the standard “stress and duress” techniques, interrogators at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba are allowed “a little bit of smacky-face”, since “some Al Qaeda just need some extra encouragement”.

The Bush administration has been widely criticised by human rights groups for its cruel and degrading treatment suffered by the people it holds in detention. There have been repeated calls for the US to respect international law and the basic human rights of detainees. Amnesty International has previously reported: “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”.

Contemptuous of such criticism, President Bush marked the UN’s Torture Victims Recognition Day last week by declaring that the US did not torture or treat cruelly any detainees. “The United States is committed to the worldwide elimination of torture and we are leading this fight by example. I call on all governments to join with the United States and the community of law-abiding nations in prohibiting, investigating, and prosecuting all acts of torture and in undertaking to prevent other cruel and unusual punishment,” he said.

The cynicism is breathtaking. Not only has the US failed to recognise the basic democratic rights of detainees or to provide any explanation for three recent deaths in custody in Afghanistan, but the CIA is known to “render” prisoners to third countries such as Jordan and Egypt for torture under US supervision. Moreover, as the US-based Human Rights Watch recently noted, officials in countries with a record of torturing prisoners now counter criticisms by declaring that they are acting no differently to the Bush administration.



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