

US Justice Department admits abuse of immigrant detainees after September 11

Peter Daniels

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The inspector general of the US Department of Justice has documented the systematic physical and verbal abuse of scores of immigrants detained in the wake of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

Hundreds were rounded up in the days following the attacks, in an atmosphere of panic and anti-immigrant hysteria instigated by the White House and the Justice Department and directed particularly against people from the Middle East. Federal authorities eventually acknowledged that 762 immigrants were detained in the 11 months after September 11, the vast majority held on routine immigration violations. Eighty-four of these were taken to the Metropolitan Detention Center (MDC), a federal prison in Brooklyn, New York.

There was never any evidence of criminal activity against the vast majority of the immigrants, who were picked up as a means by which Attorney General John Ashcroft could demonstrate “anti-terrorist” toughness and whip up an atmosphere of fear, intimidation and chauvinism. Nearly all of the detainees were released and deported, although only after months of cruel and demeaning treatment.

The first detainees arrived at the MDC on September 14, 2001, and they were immediately subjected to abuse. They were repeatedly slammed against walls, their arms and hands were painfully twisted and they were otherwise manhandled, they were unnecessarily strip-searched for purposes of humiliation and harassment, and they were repeatedly cursed, mocked and threatened.

Within days, many of the immigrants complained, and one was able to obtain a hearing before a federal judge on October 4. Prison officials then announced a policy of videotaping the detainees’ movements, using hand-held cameras. Even though most of these tapes disappeared, the inspector general’s office was finally able to locate more than 300, and they contained numerous examples of sadistic brutality on the part of prison staff.

The inspector general’s report, a 47-page document that was issued on December 18, more than two years after the original complaints that initiated the investigation, provides revealing details of what took place at the MDC. It lists six different categories of physical abuse: “slamming detainees against walls; bending or twisting detainees’ arms, hands, wrists, and fingers; lifting restrained detainees off the ground by their arms, and pulling their arms and handcuffs; stepping on detainees’ leg restraint chains; using restraints improperly; and handling detainees in an otherwise rough and inappropriate manner.”

In addition, the report lists charges that the prison staff verbally abused the immigrants “by referring to them as ‘terrorists’ and other offensive names; threatened them; cursed at them; and made offensive comments during strip searches.”

All of these charges were proven in the course of the investigation, in most cases after videotape evidence contradicted denials of officers and other staff that any mistreatment had occurred.

A typical example was that of one detainee whom staff “slammed” against a wall, warning him that they would break his neck if he moved. Another detainee was “slammed” back and forth against walls all the way to his cell.

A former officer revealed that before the videotaping began on October 5, 2001, the practice of “slamming” was almost universal. So systematic was the abuse that this witness, “Lieutenant 1,” explained the different categories of physical mistreatment. “...‘slamming’ a detainee against the wall was when officers shoved the detainee into the wall and held him there, and ‘bouncing’ a detainee off the wall was when officers shoved the detainee into the wall and then quickly pulled him back... ‘pressing’ a detainee against the wall was when officers used physical force to keep a detainee’s chest against the

wall.”

The frequency of this form of abuse understandably declined after the videotaping began, according to the detainees themselves. One detainee said officers said things like “If the camera wasn’t on I would have bashed your face,” and “The camera is your best friend.” Nevertheless, the videotapes that were eventually found showed numerous instances of the brutality described above. In some cases, the officers realized or were told by others that they were being taped, and immediately stopped in the middle of the abuse.

Many of the immigrants were slammed into a wall at the bottom of a ramp where a T-shirt was taped to the wall. The detainees were forced up against the shirt, containing a picture of the U.S. flag and the words, “These colors don’t run.”

Verbal abuse accompanied the physical mistreatment. Detainees reported that officers said things like, “Whatever you did at the World Trade Center, we will do to you,” “You’re never going to leave here,” “Don’t ask any questions, otherwise you will be dead,” “Put your nose against the wall or we will break your neck.” When detainees prayed, officers said, “Shut the fuck up! Don’t pray, Fucking Muslim. You’re praying bullshit.”

The prison authorities apparently attempted to bury the videotape evidence of this and other abuse. “During the course of our investigation,” the report declares, “we made several requests to MDC officials for videotapes. However, the officials’ responses to our requests were inconsistent and inadequate. In response to each of our requests, we obtained additional videotapes that we previously had been told were destroyed or reused.”

Almost two years ago, the inspector general’s office requested tapes covering October and November 2001, and received a total of 14 tapes in response. Some months later, it obtained another 45 tapes. Over a year later, in June 2003, it got eight more tapes. Finally, on August 20, representatives of the inspector general’s office visited the MDC and were escorted to a storage room. “Upon entering the room, we immediately observed a significant number of boxes of videotapes lining much of the wall. The boxes were clearly marked in large handwriting, ‘Tapes’ with dates beginning on October 5, 2001, and continuing to February 2002.” These tapes, 308 in all, were the only ones omitted from an inventory that had been handed over to the inspector general in August.

Although staff denied all the accusations, the videotape evidence showed otherwise. The report states, with obvious understatement, that “the videotapes also led us

to conclude that several officers lacked credibility in their interviews... In our interviews, most staff members, particularly ones still employed by the BOP [Bureau of Prisons] denied all detainees’ allegations of physical and verbal abuse... Because of the delay in the MDC’s providing us the videotapes, for almost all interviews of MDC staff members, we did not have the benefit of the MDC videotapes. Upon viewing them after the interviews, we saw that some staff members engaged in the very conduct they specifically denied in their interviews. This finding caused us to question the credibility of these staff members and their denials in other areas for which we did not have videotape evidence.”

In other words, the officers lied when they thought they could get away with it, and the prison officials apparently sought to assist them by stalling or denying the existence of the videotape evidence.

It is by no means certain whether those guilty of the sadistic abuse against the immigrants will receive anything but mild punishment. The inspector general recommended unspecified disciplinary action against 10 current employees of the Bureau of Prisons. A Justice Department spokesman issued a brief statement saying the Bureau of Prisons had been directed to review the report and take “appropriate action.”

It should come as no surprise that Attorney General Ashcroft, who held numerous press conferences trumpeting the arrests of terrorist suspects on the flimsiest of charges, is silent on the exposure of abuse and brutality carried out by his department. The sadism displayed on the videotapes was in fact inspired by the policies and public statements of Ashcroft and Bush. The inspector general’s report, set in motion by the anger and determination of the immigrants to defend their rights, is one more piece of evidence demonstrating the gigantic lie at the heart of the government’s so-called war on terrorism.



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