

Report details abuse, torture of prisoners by US forces in Afghanistan

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A report released over the weekend by Human Rights Watch, entitled “Enduring Freedom: Abuses by US Forces in Afghanistan,” details illegal and abusive treatment meted out by US troops against prisoners captured as part of the American government’s ongoing operations in Afghanistan. The report examines cases of indiscriminate and excessive use of force, arbitrary arrests, indefinite detentions, and mistreatment in detention, including torture.

The report underscores the absurdity of US claims that in invading the country it was liberating the Afghan people and creating a democracy. Not only is Afghanistan ruled by a US stooge regime in alliance with warlords, but the US military force, numbering over 10,000, operates with impunity and contempt for international law and complete disregard for the democratic rights of the country’s population.

The report, available at the Human Rights Watch web site, www.hrw.org, summarizes previously reported cases of mistreatment and presents new evidence based upon interviews with Afghans who have been released from US detention. Access to those currently held by the US or under the control of Afghan forces allied with the US is severely restricted.

The most serious charges concern the treatment of those captured by US forces, including both combatants and civilians. Human Rights Watch estimates that since 2002 over 1,000 individuals have been arrested, many having been subsequently released. These individuals describe conditions of intense mental and physical duress that constitute torture according to internationally accepted standards and the United States’ own statements condemning similar practices carried out by other governments.

Human Rights Watch cites two men who report that during the period of their detention at the main American detention facility at the Bagram airbase, “bright lights were set up outside their cells, shining in, and US military personnel took shifts keeping the detainees awake by banging on the metal walls of their cells with batons. The detainees said they were terrified and disoriented by sleep deprivation,

which they said lasted for several weeks.”

Also quoted is a Pakistani fighter with the Taliban who was detained by US troops at the Kandahar airport in early 2002. He describes being shackled and beaten by US troops during the course of his flight to the detention facility. All of the captives on the plane were forced to sit in painful positions. “If we fell to the side or moved,” the individual is quoted as saying, “the armed men standing over our heads would beat us mercilessly with their army boots, kicking us in our back and kidneys. We were all beaten, without exception.”

According to the individual, these practices continued during the period of detention. “When we were in Kandahar, we were not allowed to talk with each other and if we did, we were beaten and we were not allowed to sleep. For instance, if we were sleeping we were woken up, or if we were covering our head with our bed cover we were beaten strongly.”

The statements of these and other prisoners interviewed by Human Rights Watch are corroborated by previous reports and by the statements of US military officials. In March 2003, Roger King, a US military spokesman at the Bagram facility, acknowledged, “We do force people to stand for an extended period of time...Disruption of sleep has been reported as an effective way of reducing people’s inhibition about talking or their resistance to questioning.”

Previous reports indicate that the methods of constant shackling, sleep deprivation and prolonged standing are common techniques employed by US forces at Bagram. Beatings may be more common at other facilities.

The HRW report states that after a January 2002 raid by US troops, 20 individuals were captured and taken to Kandahar. “Several of these detainees said that they were kicked and punched repeatedly by US forces after they arrived, and suffered broken bones that went untreated...Among these beaten was an elderly man, who had his hand broken.”

Conditions may be even worse at prisons run by Afghans allied with the US, including a facility with hundreds of

prisoners run by the notorious warlord General Abdul Rashid Dostum, a member of the government of Hamid Karzai.

With US complicity, Dostum's forces were responsible for the massacre of thousands of Taliban prisoners at Mazar-i-Sharif at the end of the war. The report quotes a human rights monitor who has visited prisoners under Dostum's control as noting that severe beatings are an "ordinary thing." These Afghan prisons cannot be separated from those run by the US. American military and CIA officials have routine access to these detainees, most of whom have been captured in joint operations with the US.

The report notes that such treatment is in violation of international humanitarian and human rights law. The Geneva Conventions prohibit torture and cruel treatment, whether physical or mental. Prolonged shackling has been termed torture by the United Nations secretary general. The US State Department has categorized prolonged sleep deprivation as torture in its reports on human rights abuses by other countries.

In addition to torture, Afghans are subject to the classic conditions of a military state: arbitrary and indefinite detention with no recourse or legal rights. US forces often use excessive force in arresting individuals, resulting in casualties and property destruction.

The report details the case of one individual, Ahmed Khan, whose home was raided in late July 2002. American troops bombarded his house, where he lived with his wife and children, using massive firepower, although there were no signs of resistance from Khan or anyone else.

According to Khan, helicopters fired on the house with machine guns, shattering windows and doors, after which troops stormed the house. "They broke all the windows, and tore the doors off cupboards, and shot open the boxes," apparently looking for weapons. One individual—a neighboring farmer and father of four—was killed during the operation, and another was wounded. A UN staff person reported seeing the area littered with spent shells, all from American weapons.

Khan alleges that during or after the raid many of his possessions were stolen, either by American troops or Afghans allied with the Americans.

Other cases involve a similar pattern of massive American force against those suspected of possessing weapons or having ties to Taliban forces. The report points to well documented instances, including an attack by US forces in December 2003. The bombing campaign in a residential neighborhood resulted in the death of eight civilians, including six children. (See "US military kills six Afghan children in new atrocity").

Some of those detained are subsequently released after

American troops determine they have no relevant knowledge. Those who remain in the detention facilities are denied basic democratic rights and due process.

"Ordinary civilians caught up in the military operations and arrested are left in a hopeless situation," writes Human Rights Watch. "Once in custody, they have no way of challenging the legal basis for their detention or obtaining a hearing before an adjudicative body. They have no access to legal counsel. Their release is wholly dependent on the decision of the US military command, with little apparent regard for the requirements of international law or the due process requirements of human rights law."

All the prisoners are being held as "unlawful combatants," a category the US has devised to maintain that the prisoners are not protected by the Geneva Conventions.

The US military has arrogated to itself the right to "disappear" Afghans without any accountability. The report points to the case of one individual, Abdul Gehafouz Akhundzada, who was arrested in February 2003. "After the arrest...Akhundzada was taken away in a helicopter, presumably to Bagram airbase, but his family was not informed of the location or reason for his arrest over the following months. As of late 2003, there was no response to appeals made through local government officials to both the US and the Afghan authorities for an explanation as to his whereabouts."

The Human Rights Watch report has been released amidst signs of growing social tensions in Afghanistan. With the US carrying out a large-scale military campaign in the south of the country with the aim of capturing Osama bin Laden and other Al Qaeda leaders, there is no doubt that the anti-democratic methods employed by American forces will continue and intensify.



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