

Furore over torture in Iraq prompts new revelations of US abuse in Afghanistan

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Following the graphic exposure of US torture methods in Iraq, former prisoners in Afghanistan have provided detailed accounts of similar physical, sexual and psychological abuse meted out to them by US interrogators and soldiers while held in US-run detention facilities. Their statements confirm that the Bush administration has been responsible for the systematic torture of detainees in a network of prisons and detention centres in Afghanistan, Iraq and other countries.

Having ignored previous complaints of abuse from former prisoners and human rights bodies, the US military was compelled last week to order a “top-to-bottom” review of its detention centres in Afghanistan, where some 350 detainees officially remain incarcerated. Brigadier General Charles Jacoby has been appointed to review the treatment of prisoners in about 20 US facilities to ensure that every facility meets “internationally accepted standards” and to report by mid-June.

The “review” is certain to be another whitewash. The US military has refused requests by journalists, the US-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) and the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission to inspect the major US detention centre at the Bagram air base north of Kabul. While the International Red Cross has been allowed to visit Bagram, it has been denied access to other facilities and has not been provided with full lists of detainees.

The worst cases of abuse involve the deaths of at least three prisoners in US custody. Dilawar, a 22-year-old farmer and part-time taxi driver, and Mullah Habibullah, 30, died while in custody at Bagram in December 2002. While the military initially dismissed the deaths as due to natural causes, the army’s own pathologists described them as homicides due at least in part to “blunt force injuries”. Eighteen months later the military has failed to complete an investigation into the two cases.

Defending the military’s conduct, the commander of US forces in Afghanistan, Lieutenant General David Barno, declared recently that there were “very significant changes” to the management of prisoners in early 2003 following the two deaths. Since then, however, a third detainee is known

to have died in Asadabad, in eastern Afghanistan, in June 2003. Military authorities have ignored repeated requests by HRW for details of this death and the results of any investigations into the three cases.

The latest cases of torture to come to light underscore the fact that the regime inside US detention centres remains unchanged.

Former Afghan police colonel Sayed Nabi Siddiqui gave a graphic account to the media this month of the abuse that he suffered at the hands of US interrogators and soldiers last year. Siddiqui claims he was detained after complaining about the corruption and abuse of a fellow police officer. He was held for 22 days at the US firebase at Gardez and another week near Kandahar before being moved to Bagram where he was released after 12 days with a note declaring that he posed no threat to the US or its interests in Afghanistan.

According to a *Washington Post* article: “Siddiqui said his captors indulged in frequent sexual taunting and harassment that included poking fingers and objects in his rectum, photographing him while naked, making farm animal noises and asking him which kind of beast he preferred for sex. The worst moment, said the father of nine, was when he was told his wife and daughters had become prostitutes in his absence.”

Describing the humiliation to the newspaper, the police officer recounted: “They were laughing when they said this. I told them please, I am a police officer and a Muslim. I have asthma and it is hard for me to breathe. I am not Al Qaeda or Taliban. I fought against the Russians, and I was happy when the Americans came to Afghanistan. I asked them to please let me go home to my family, but they paid no attention.”

Following Siddiqui, a number of other former detainees began to speak out. Maboob Ahmad, 35, a farm labourer, was detained for four months from July 2003. He told the *Los Angeles Times* that he had been beaten, kept in uncomfortable positions for long periods and forced to quickly drink large quantities of water. He also said that he

had been hauled to the ceiling with his hands tied then dropped. “They pulled me up to the ceiling and then released the chain. There was a piece of wood on the floor which my knees would hit. They did it twice and it hurt.”

Shah Mohammed, a field worker, explained to the *Los Angeles Times* that he and four other men had been dragged off in the middle of the night after a US raid on their houses. Once at the jail, “they were stripped and inspected in the presence of female soldiers, thrown in a cold shower and then left to dry in the night air. After some hours, he said, they were given gowns that were open at the back. That started an ordeal that lasted about a week for him. Denied sleep, ordered to stand, squat, hold one leg or do callisthenics, he also was isolated from his relatives and questioned every day about the Taliban, he said. Most of the time he was hooded, and the shackles were rarely removed.”

When Siddiqui’s case became public, the US ambassador to Kabul, Zalmay Khalilzad, issued a statement declaring that “this was the first time anyone in the military chain of command or the United States embassy has heard of this alleged mistreatment.” It was yet another lie. Last August Siddiqui provided details of his treatment to the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission—a body set up by the Kabul government—which in turn raised the matter with US military officials. Nothing was done.

The Commission has investigated more than 40 complaints, including over 30 cases of beatings, detention of innocent people, damage to houses, injuries and disrespect of Afghan customs during raids. Commission spokesman Rafiullah Bedar told the *Los Angeles Times*: “There is no clear investigation of how many Afghans are kept, where they are imprisoned. The Americans are not explaining to the relatives what has happened to their loved ones. The other problem is that our own government does not have control over these problems. They have no authority.”

The US military deals with its puppet government in Kabul in the same contemptuous manner as it treats basic democratic rights. As in Iraq, the policy of raiding villages, breaking into homes and arbitrarily seizing and detaining Afghans as Taliban and Al Qaeda “suspects” is aimed at intimidating and terrorising a hostile population. The use of torture to extract information and “break” detainees flows directly from the neo-colonial character of the US-led occupation.

With the sole exception of US citizen John Walker Lindt, none of the hundreds of prisoners seized in Afghanistan have ever been charged or tried for any crime. In flagrant violation of the Geneva Conventions and basic legal norms, they have been held indefinitely as “illegal combatants”—a category that has no standing in international law. They have been denied any avenue of appeal against their detention and

any access to lawyers, family or friends.

In a statement on May 13, HRW declared that “mistreatment of prisoners by US military and intelligence personnel in Afghanistan is a systematic problem and not limited to a few isolated cases”. HRW researcher John Sifton said: “Afghans have been telling us for well over a year about mistreatment in US custody. We warned US officials repeatedly about these problems in 2003 and 2004. It’s time now for the United States to publicise the results of its investigations of abuse, fully prosecute those responsible, and provide access to independent monitors.”

The HRW statement noted that the organisation had published a detailed report in March entitled “Enduring Freedom: Abuses by US Forces in Afghanistan” that “documented numerous cases of mistreatment of detainees at various detention sites in Afghanistan, including extreme sleep deprivation, exposure to freezing temperatures, and severe beatings. Detainees complained about being stripped of their clothing and photographed naked. Some of these abusive practices during interrogation were similar to those recently reported in Iraq.”

All this evidence points to the fact that the systematic torture of prisoners has been taking place in Afghanistan with the knowledge and support of military authorities. The only reason that the US military now feels the need to “review” its torture chambers in Afghanistan is the political crisis provoked by the public furore over the sickening revelations of abuse in Iraq, and more broadly by the deepening opposition in both countries to the US-led occupations.



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