

New US torture revelations

Former prisoners demand release of Guantanamo Bay videotapes

Richard Phillips
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Statements by former British prisoners at Guantanamo Bay over the past week provide further damning proof that the sadistic torture used at Abu Ghraib in Iraq originated in Afghanistan and the Pentagon's infamous military prison in Cuba. The declarations were followed by new evidence that Australian detainees in Guantanamo Bay—David Hicks and Mamdouh Habib—were beaten and abused.

On May 13, Shafiq Rasul and Asif Iqbal, two British prisoners released in March, issued an "open letter" to US President Bush and the Senate Armed Services Committee detailing the abuse and denouncing Washington's denials of torture in Guantanamo Bay. They have demanded full public access to all video and photographs taken during interrogation sessions at the top-security American jail. (*See*: <http://www.ccr-ny.org/v2/reports/docs/ltr%20to%20Sentate%2012may04v2.pdf>).

Held by the US military in Guantanamo Bay without charge for over two years, Rasul and Iqbal said they were forced into making false confessions after prolonged solitary confinement and other forms of psychological and physical abuse. In Afghanistan they were beaten and had guns held to their heads by US Army officers who threatened to kill them.

"From the moment of our arrival in Guantanamo Bay (and indeed long before that) we were deliberately humiliated and degraded by the use of methods that we now read US officials denying," the two men wrote.

Interrogation techniques described in their letter include: "short-shackling" whereby detainees were forced to squat with their hands chained between their legs and fastened to the floor for hours on end during interrogations; leaving detainees naked and chained to the floor while women were brought into the room; strobe lights, loud music, and freezing air to make the difficult physical conditions even worse; and the use of dogs to terrify prisoners.

"We should point out that there were and no doubt still are cameras everywhere in the interrogation areas. We are aware that evidence that could contradict what is being said officially is in existence. We know that CCTV cameras, videotapes and photographs exist since we were regularly filmed and photographed during interrogations and at other times, as well."

Physical abuse was commonplace, the letter continued. "Soldiers told us personally of going into cells and conducting beatings with metal bars which they did not report. Soldiers told us 'we can do anything we want.'"

On one occasion a man who had become psychologically disturbed was lying on the floor of his cage when a group of eight or nine guards known as the Extreme Reaction Force (ERF) severely assaulted him. "They stamped on his neck, kicked him in the stomach, even though he had metal rods there as a result of an operation, and they picked up his head

and smashed his face into the floor," the letter said.

"One female officer was ordered to go into the cell and kick him and beat him, which she did, in his stomach. This is known as 'ERFing'. Another detainee, from Yemen, was beaten up so badly that we understand he is still in hospital 18 months later. It was suggested that he was trying to commit suicide. This was not the case.

"We wish to make it clear that all of these and other incidents and all of the brutality, humiliation and degradation were clearly taking place as a result of official policies and orders."

Under General Geoffrey Miller, now commander of all US-run detention centers in Iraq, it was regular practice at Guantanamo Bay for detainees to have all their hair, including their beards, shaved off for failing to cooperate during interrogations. Prisoners were also moved to the "Romeo" block where they would be kept naked for weeks on end for violating camp rules, such as having two plastic cups in their cage, instead on one, or too much toilet paper.

"We are completely sure that the International Red Cross has all of these complaints recorded and must undoubtedly have drawn all of them to the attention of the Administration. We therefore find it extraordinary that such lies are being told publicly today by senior officials as to the conditions and methods used at Guantanamo Bay. We are confident that records and pictures must exist and that these should all now be provided to the public in your country as well as ours at the earliest opportunity so that they can form their own judgement."

Three days after publication of the "open letter," Tarek Dergoul, who was also released from Guantanamo Bay in March, confirmed Rasul and Iqbal's allegations in a chilling interview with Britain's *Observer* newspaper. Twenty-six year-old Dergoul had been so traumatized by the physical and mental abuse during his two-year detention that he had been unable to speak about it publicly until last Sunday. He still has nightmares, suffers memory loss and migraines and is being treated at the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture.

Dergoul said that the methods used at Guantanamo Bay mirrored those used at Abu Ghraib and included sexual humiliation. American military officers also threatened to "render" him to other countries where he would be subjected to even more violent forms of torture. He also revealed that every time the Extreme Reaction Force was unleashed against a prisoner it was recorded on digital video by military officers. Lieutenant Colonel Leon Sumpter, the Guantanamo Joint Task Force spokesman, later told the British media that these tapes did exist and were archived at Guantanamo Bay.

Dergoul was captured by Northern Alliance forces in Afghanistan and handed over to the US military in exchange for a \$5,000 cash payment. He had nothing to do with the Taliban or Osama bin Laden but was wounded when US planes bombed a house where he was staying. Dergoul said that

the sexual humiliation and violence that occurred at Abu Ghraib was standard operating procedure.

“When I arrived [at Bagram] with a bag over my head,” he said, “I was stripped naked and taken to a big room with 15 or 20 MPs [military police]. They started taking photos and then they did a full cavity search. As they were doing that they were taking close-ups, concentrating on my private parts.”

Dergoul, who saw guards with guns and baseball bats threatening detainees in Afghanistan, was accused of being a member of Al Qaeda and subjected to 20 to 25 interrogations at the US airbase.

“I was in extreme pain from the frostbite and other injuries and I was so weak I could barely stand. It was freezing cold and I was shaking and shivering like a washing machine. The interrogators—who questioned me at gunpoint—said if I confessed I’d be going home. Finally, I agreed I’d been at Tora Bora—though I still wouldn’t admit I’d ever met bin Laden.”

“They had already searched me and my cell twice that day, gone through my stuff, touched my Koran, felt my body around my private parts. And now they wanted to do it again, just to provoke me, but I said no, because if you submit to everything you turn into a zombie.

“I heard a guard talking into his radio, ‘ERF, ERF, ERF,’ and I knew what was coming—the Extreme Reaction Force. The five cowards, I called them—five guys came running in with riot gear. They pepper-sprayed me in the face and I started vomiting; in all I must have brought up five cupfuls. They pinned me down and attacked me, poking their fingers in my eyes, and forced my head into the toilet pan and flushed. They tied me up like a beast and then they were kneeling on me, kicking and punching. Finally they dragged me out of the cell in chains, into the rec yard, and shaved my beard, my hair, my eyebrows.”

A month later he was moved to a Kandahar prison camp. His frostbitten feet, which were not treated, became septic, the infection spread and his toe had to be amputated. Part of his arm also had to be amputated because of shrapnel wounds.

He told the *Observer* that he was only allowed two showers in three months at Kandahar before being transported—bound, blindfolded and sedated—to Guantanamo Bay. He was held in a high-level isolation block at Camp Delta for over a year where he was deprived all stimulation or “comfort items.” Because he helped organize a series of hunger strikes and other protests he was targeted by the ERF.

For a month last year he was taken every day to an interrogation room chained to a ring in the floor and then left alone for up to eight hours with the air conditioning running at the lowest temperatures and unable to go to the toilet. The cold air would become extremely painful on his amputation stumps. Eventually, he would be taken back to his cell for a few hours and then returned to the freezing interrogation room again. “It was not about trying to get information. It was just about trying to break you,” he said.

The London-born and raised Dergoul, who said he had been “non-political” prior to his illegal detention, told the newspaper: “I now look on America as a terrorist state because that’s what they have done—terrorized us—and I condemn Britain as well for contributing to it.”

In other developments, lawyer Stephen Kenny, who is representing Australian prisoner, David Hicks, said last week that his 28-year-old client had been subjected to “orchestrated abuse” at the prison. Hicks has been illegally incarcerated in Guantanamo Bay without charge for almost two and a half years.

Kenny, who is legally bound by a special agreement with the US military not to reveal conditions inside Guantanamo Bay, told the Australian media: “I’m referring to specific incidents that I believe were not just the actions of individual guards, but rather a well-known activity that must have been authorized by some reasonably high-up people in the chain of command of US forces.” He said that Hicks had complained to the Red Cross about these abuses in 2002 and assumed that this information would be passed on to the US and Australian governments.

Additional details on Hicks’s treatment emerged on May 19 when Shah Mohammed, who had been in an adjoining cell in Guantanamo Bay, was interviewed in the Australian media. Mohammed, a former baker who was handed over to US forces by the Northern Alliance, was released from Camp Delta last year and repatriated to Afghanistan.

He said that US soldiers had viciously bashed Hicks, who was bound and chained, on at least three occasions during two-hour interrogation sessions in Afghanistan and that the interrogations and beatings were videotaped. He said US soldiers deliberately targeted Hicks because of his ethnic background. According to a *Sydney Morning Herald* report, Hicks was “beaten for hours, denied sleep and shackled during interrogations.” The newspaper said that the most savage and prolonged abuse occurred on US Navy ships.

Stephen Kenny and Terry Hicks, David’s father, have called on the Howard government to release all information it has on these incidents. The Howard government, which, like the Bush and Blair administrations, claims that Guantanamo Bay prisoners have been treated “humanely,” has refused to provide Kenny with any details. It has transcripts of Australian intelligence agency interrogation sessions with Hicks but blocked access to these and other documents, claiming that it would endanger national security if they were released.

On Thursday Stephen Hopper, Mamdouh Habib’s lawyer, said that his client had been systematically assaulted in Egypt with electric shocks, beatings and death threats and then psychologically and physically abused in Guantanamo Bay.

Habib was seized in Pakistan in October 2001, before the US invasion of Afghanistan. Under the direction of the US military and with Australian consular support, he was “rendered” to Egypt for five months before being removed to Guantanamo Bay in May 2002. (*See: “Howard government complicit in detention of Australian citizen by US military”*)

In an interview broadcast on Australian television last night, Tarek Dergoul, who spent three months in a cage alongside Habib in Guantanamo Bay, confirmed these allegations. On the television program, Dergoul told Hopper and Mamdouh Habib’s wife, Maha, that he saw the 48-year-old father of four beaten and sprayed with pepper gas.

He said that Habib was kept in solitary confinement for long periods. His skin was covered with a tropical skin rash, he could hardly walk and had become mentally unbalanced. Habib constantly told Dergoul that his family had been killed by US agents and refused to answer their letters, believing them to be fakes. Maha Habib has not had any contact with her husband for over 18 months.

Hopper said the Australian government had “aided and abetted” the torture of an Australian citizen and demanded it reveal who authorized Habib’s rendering to Egypt. Stephen Kenny said allegations of abuse were now “so overwhelming” that there had to be a full inquiry into the treatment of prisoners in Afghanistan and Guantanamo Bay.

The sadistic abuse, sexual humiliation and others forms of torture used at Guantanamo Bay, Abu Ghraib and other US military prisons constitute the real face of the Bush administration’s “war against terror.” These actions, along with the illegal and unprovoked invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, are war crimes under the Geneva Conventions and comparable with the methods of Hitler’s Nazi Germany. All those responsible for these activities—from the top levels of the government and the military down—must be brought to trial and prosecuted.



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