

Australian government dismisses proof of torture in Iraq

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The criminal complicity of the Howard government in the US-led subjugation of Iraq has been underscored yet again by its dismissive reaction to the revelations of systematic torture and abuse by occupying forces.

After issuing the most perfunctory of condemnations, Howard and his ministers quickly played down the significance of the evidence of torture, providing a series of threadbare rationalisations.

Howard was asked for his reaction following the publication of the photographs from inside Abu Ghraib prison. "Oh, I was appalled, but I note immediately and it should be said immediately in defence of the [US] military that they are court martialling people," he declared. "People who did far worse than that under Saddam Hussein were promoted, they weren't court martialled."

Like almost all of Howard's declarations relating to the occupation of Iraq and the "war on terror," this comment was lifted directly from the Bush administration.

Howard later said that the "important point to make is that the American authorities are acting quickly to bring the people alleged to have done these things to justice". As the prime minister is fully aware, this is a bare-faced lie. The Bush administration and US military forces have consistently ignored and covered up repeated warnings from the Red Cross and human rights groups about the appalling treatment of Iraqi prisoners.

Not only that: it turns out that the Australian government has also known about the abuse of Iraqi prisoners for months. Defence Minister Robert Hill has admitted he was aware of the Red Cross reports three months ago. Both he and the prime minister have insisted, however, that no-one in the government obtained a copy of the report until after the publication

of the Abu Ghraib photographs. In other words, no-one bothered to follow up the reports of torture, or even seek clarification of what was going on.

Howard also regurgitated the lie that the abuses in Iraq were attributable to a few "bad apples". "It's been made perfectly plain that that is not the conduct that represents the attitude and the behaviour of the American military in its entirety," Howard said. "Inevitably, sadly, in an army of 150,000 you will get some people who will misbehave."

This statement reveals the cynical nature of Howard's claim to have been appalled by the photographs. For the prime minister, the torture and ritual abuse of Iraqis by occupation troops constitutes inevitable, albeit unfortunate, "misbehaviour".

Moreover, there is a growing body of evidence demonstrating that the photographs taken inside Abu Ghraib prison represent just one aspect of a systematic policy of torture. The flagrant disregard for the Geneva Convention on prisoners' rights was a calculated decision made at the very top of the Bush administration.

Foreign Minister Alexander Downer expressed concern not for the fundamental rights or welfare of Iraqi prisoners, but rather for the potential effect the publication of the photographs would have for the "war on terror" and the coalition's plans for Iraq. "This is a propaganda victory for Al Qaeda," Downer told Channel 9. "And that's in my heart why I feel so strongly about these pictures that I've seen."

Downer insisted that Australia had no obligations towards the Iraqi prisoners, and bore no responsibility for the torture. The foreign minister justified his position on the grounds that, despite participating in the illegal invasion of the country, Australia had not been assigned occupying power status under UN Security

Council resolution 1483.

“I don’t think there’s any need for us to do anything about [the torture and abuse],” Downer explained. “I certainly reflected on that, but there’s no need for us to do anything about it. The British and the American leadership are—well, they’re sufficiently appalled, and they obviously would be fully aware of the views not only of Australia but of the rest of the world... I don’t think there’s anything much more we can do.”

On the contrary, the Howard government bears full responsibility for the crimes being committed against the Iraqi people. From the outset, Howard consciously worked to position his government as the Bush administration’s closest ally in the war against Iraq. In the period preceding the invasion, he and his ministers repeated every lie concerning weapons of mass destruction and Al Qaeda connections with Baghdad in order to justify the Bush administration’s neo-colonial war of plunder in the face of widespread public opposition.

As these various pretexts rapidly unravelled, Howard, along with Bush and Blair, turned increasingly to the argument that the purpose of the invasion was to “liberate” the Iraqi people. The publication of the Abu Ghraib photographs explodes this particular myth once and for all.

Moreover, since Australian soldiers have handed over approximately 100 Iraqis to US forces, Australia is responsible, under international law, for ensuring that these prisoners are treated in accordance with the Geneva conventions. An agreement signed in March 2003 by Australian, British, and American commanders explicitly noted this ongoing obligation for the welfare of prisoners.

But Howard has repeatedly denied any responsibility for any Iraqi prisoners. “Australia had no prisoners of war,” Howard said. “At no stage did we even have formal custody of them because we had an arrangement with the Americans that they would have custody of them.”

Howard’s silence on the criminal activities of the US-led forces is calculated to send a message to Bush that he will continue to extend his unconditional support to the occupation, no matter what is revealed, and maintain the participation of Australian troops.

The opposition Labor Party continues its abject capitulation to the Howard government on the invasion

and occupation of Iraq.

Labor leader Mark Latham feigned outrage over the publication of the photographs, echoing Howard’s initial response. “It’s an appalling thing to see,” he said, but then immediately added. “I was glad to see that the American authorities are taking action and giving assurances it won’t happen again”.

While there was uproar around the world over the revelations of torture at the Abu Ghraib prison, there was at least one quiet spot—the Australian parliament. The foreign minister received just one question from Labor on Iraq, and the prime minister none.

Avoiding any challenge to Howard or Bush over the criminal and illegal character of the war itself, the opposition criticised the government for refusing to accept Australia’s full responsibilities as an occupying power. “Labor has a very strong commitment to ensuring that Australia meets its international obligations as an occupying power,” Latham declared. “We don’t want those atrocities to be repeated. They obviously undermine and weaken the credibility of the occupying forces as liberators, and it is a terrible thing.”

This makes clear that Latham’s primary concern about the torture revelations is that they have undermined the US-led occupation of Iraq. In fact, they flow directly from it. As the long and bloody history of imperialism reveals, such methods arise organically out of the nature and goals of the occupation itself.



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