

Red Cross report documents US torture of Iraqi prisoners

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In the wake of the publication of photos depicting the brutal and humiliating treatment of Iraqi prisoners at the hands of US troops at the Abu Ghraib prison, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has released to the press its February 2004 report on the handling of prisoners and other detainees by Coalition Forces (CF) in Iraq.

The report covers the period between March and November 2003, and deals with treatment of Iraqi detainees “during arrest, internment and interrogation.” The document details gross violations of numerous articles of the Geneva Conventions by US and British forces and paints a picture of widespread and systemic abuse of prisoners—particularly those “persons arrested in connection with suspected security offences or deemed to have an ‘intelligence’ value.”

The executive summary of the ICRC report says that these so-called “High Value Detainees” “were at high risk of being subjected to a variety of harsh treatments ranging from insults, threats and humiliations to both physical and psychological coercion, which in some cases was tantamount to torture, in order to force cooperation with their interrogators.”

In contradiction to military and Bush administration officials’ claims that the abuse depicted in the Abu Ghraib photos came as a shock, the report explains how numerous memoranda on Geneva Conventions violations were sent to the Coalition Forces, with recommendations for correcting the abusive treatment of prisoners. In most cases, however, the abuse continued and appeared to have been sanctioned at high levels of the military.

At every stage—from arrest to final internment in regular prison facilities—violations of the Geneva Conventions occurred. The Third and Fourth conventions mandate that prisoners be protected against acts of violence, intimidation and insults and that the human dignity, physical integrity and cultural sensitivity of captured individuals be protected at all times. The ICRC states, however, that during arrests the rights of the vast majority of arrestees were violated and that these procedures “tended to follow a pattern”:

“Arresting authorities entered houses usually after dark, breaking down doors, waking up residents roughly, yelling orders, forcing family members into one room under military guard while searching the rest of the house.... They arrested suspects, tying their hands in the back with flexi-cuffs, hooding them, and taking them away. Sometimes they arrested all adult males present in a house, including elderly, handicapped or sick people. Treatment often included pushing people around, insulting, taking aim with rifles, punching and kicking and striking with rifles. Individuals were often led away in whatever they happened to be wearing at the time of arrest—sometimes in

pyjamas or underwear—and were denied the opportunity to gather a few essential belongings, such as clothing, hygiene items, medicine or eyeglasses.”

Furthermore, “certain CF military intelligence officers” told the ICRC they estimated that between 70 and 90 percent of those rounded up in these terror raids were arrested by mistake.

The Geneva Conventions also require that within one week of capture prisoners must be allowed to fill out capture or internment cards, indicating their arrest, the address of their current place of internment and their health. This has been routinely violated by the Coalition Forces, resulting in what the ICRC describes as the “de facto ‘disappearance’” of the vast majority of detainees.

The report states, “Nine months into the present conflict, there is still no satisfactorily functioning system of notification to the families of captured or arrested persons, even though hundreds of arrests continue to be carried out every week.” Family members go for weeks and months with no information about their loved ones, often fearing they may be dead. Many only learn about the condition and whereabouts of their relatives when they return home or through word from released detainees.

The ICRC has repeatedly raised this issue with detaining authorities since March 2003, “including at the highest level of the CF in August 2003,” but there has been little improvement in the notification system.

The report next addresses the treatment of prisoners during their transfer and initial custody. Witnesses described to the ICRC the arrest of nine men in a Basra hotel on September 13, 2003. According to the report, they “were made to kneel, face and hands against the ground, as if in a prayer position. The soldiers stamped on the back of the neck of those raising their head. They confiscated their money without issuing a receipt. The suspects were taken to Al-Hakimiya [an office formerly used by the Iraqi secret police] ... and then beaten severely by CP personnel.”

One of the men, a 28-year-old father of two, subsequently died. “His co-arrestees heard him screaming and asking for assistance,” according to the report. His International Death Certificate indicated “cardio-respiratory arrest—asphyxia” as the condition leading to death—with the cause “unknown.”

The ICRC also heard allegations of other deaths as a result of “harsh internment conditions, ill-treatment, lack of medical attention,” particularly in the Tikrit holding area known formerly as the Saddam Hussein Islamic School.

Some of the most egregious violations of prisoners’ rights are detailed in the section of the document on treatment during interrogation. Prisoners of “intelligence” value whose interrogation

was supervised by military intelligence “were subjected to a variety of ill-treatments ranging from insults and humiliation to both physical and psychological coercion that in some cases might amount to torture in order to force them to cooperate with their interrogators,” according to the report.

The ICRC states that in some interrogation locations, such as the Abu Ghraib military intelligence section, these methods of torture “appeared to be part of the standard operating procedures by military intelligence personnel to obtain confessions and extract information.”

The brutal procedures utilized by interrogators are too numerous to list, but include the following:

- * Hooding of prisoners for periods lasting from a few hours to four consecutive days, “during which hoods were lifted only for drinking, eating or going to the toilets.” This allowed the interrogators to remain anonymous and also heightened the anxiety in conjunction with beatings, as prisoners would be unsure when blows would be delivered.

- * Handcuffing with tight (plastic) flexi-cuffs, in some cases resulting in permanent bodily damage;

- * Pressing the face into the ground with boots;

- * Threats, including “ill-treatment, reprisals against family members, imminent execution or transfer to Guantanamo”;

- * Being held naked in solitary confinement, with insufficient sleep, food or water deprivation, minimal access to showers, denial of access to open air;

- * Being paraded naked before other prisoners, sometimes hooded or with women’s underwear over the head;

- * Exposure to loud music, prolonged exposure to the sun in temperatures reaching as high as 50 degrees Celsius (122 degrees Fahrenheit).

Prisoners examined by ICRC medical personnel presented physical marks and psychological symptoms consistent with such treatment.

When the Red Cross visited the “isolation section” of Abu Ghraib in mid-October 2003, “they witnessed the practice of keeping persons deprived of their liberty completely naked in totally empty concrete cells and in total darkness, allegedly for several consecutive days.” When the ICRC investigators requested an explanation from the authorities, the report states, “The military intelligence officer in charge of the interrogation explained that this practice was ‘part of the process.’”

According to information collected by the ICRC, prisoners were regularly questioned without knowing the reason for their arrest or the charges against them.

The Red Cross also visited Umm Qasr camp and its successor, Camp Bucca. Prisoners selected for interrogation—whether arrested by British, Danish, Dutch or Italian armed forces—were segregated in a separate section of the facility for investigation. There they were “routinely treated by their guards with general contempt, with petty violence such as having orders screamed at them and being cursed, kicked, struck with rifle butts, roughed up or pushed around.” They were also threatened with indefinite internment or transfer to Guantanamo.

A former prisoner at Camp Cropper alleged that he had been “hooded and cuffed with flexi-cuffs, threatened to be tortured and killed, urinated on, kicked in the head, lower back and groin, force-fed a baseball ... and deprived of sleep for four consecutive days. Interrogators would allegedly take turns ill-treating him. When he said he would complain to the ICRC he was allegedly beaten more.”

The Red Cross report makes clear that Coalition Authority officials

were repeatedly informed of these violations of the human rights of prisoners. In May 2003, the ICRC sent the CF a memorandum reporting on more than 200 allegations of mistreatment of prisoners during capture and interrogation. In early July the ICRC also sent the CF a working paper detailing about 50 allegations of ill-treatment in the military intelligence section of Camp Cropper.

The ICRC also documented the widespread abuse of power and mistreatment of prisoners in the custody of Iraqi police. This included the practice of threatening to hand them over to the CF, or extorting money to prevent it. Former detainees reported Iraqi police whipped them with cables, and kicked them in the lower parts of the body, including the testicles. Prisoners alleged they were also burned with cigarettes, a claim substantiated by marks found on their bodies by ICRC delegates. Detainees often drew parallels between Iraqi police practices and those of the former Saddam Hussein regime.

The report also describes instances when detaining authorities fired on prisoners with live ammunition. On June 13, 2003, at Abu Ghraib, guards from three watchtowers opened fire on demonstrating prisoners, injuring seven and killing one. In another incident on November 24, 2003, at Abu Ghraib, deadly force was applied in response to a riot by prisoners, who were protesting inadequate food and clothing, lack of judicial guarantees and lack of family contact. The detainees allegedly attempted to force open the gate to the camp. After firing with non-lethal weapons, the guards opened fire with lethal ammunition, resulting in the deaths of four detainees.

The Third Geneva Convention stipulates that use of firearms is an extreme measure which should only be used in response to armed resistance or threat to the lives of detaining personnel or other prisoners. These incidents were summarily investigated by the CF, which concluded that legitimate use of firearms had been made.

The Red Cross also reports the September 3, 2003, case of three detainees who were severely injured by the explosion of what seemed to be a cluster bomb while they were working to clear rubbish along the barbed-wire fence of Camp Bucca. All three required limb amputations.

The ICRC also collected numerous allegations of outright theft by Coalition Forces, who confiscated money, cars and other valuables during arrests, without providing receipts—a violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention. One individual alleged that upon arrest at his home in May 2003 the CF seized “71,450,000 Iraqi dinars, 14,000 US dollars, two wedding rings, a video camera, a watch, real-estate property documents, his wife’s residential documents, his father’s will, his private diaries, as well as most of the family private documents and personal identification and other papers.”



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