

Soldiers report British torture of Iraqi civilians

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Reports and photographs of British soldiers torturing an Iraqi civilian published in the *Daily Mirror* on May 1 have created uproar.

They depict an Iraqi civilian thought to be aged 18-20 being tortured by what the newspaper says are British soldiers serving in the Queen's Lancashire Regiment, which has been stationed in Iraq over the past year. The attack allegedly took place in an army truck in a camp in the southern city of Basra in 2003.

The images obtained from two soldiers (known as Soldier A and Soldier B) who had witnessed the attack have sparked a crisis within the armed forces and the Blair government, already thrown onto the defensive by the horrendous evidence of US forces torturing Iraqi captives.

Journalist Paul Byrne wrote, "The shocking pictures on this page were handed to us by one of the attackers and a colleague. We have agreed to protect their identities as they fear reprisals".

The photos show a cowering figure with his hands tied behind his back clothed in just an Iraq soccer shirt and his underwear. The victim's head is covered with a sandbag. The images show a soldier urinating on him and butting him in the groin with a rifle, and the victim being kicked in the head, having a rifle pressed against his head and having his neck stamped on. Another photo shows blood congealing at the bottom of the sandbag near the neck of the victim.

Byrne wrote, "After an EIGHT-HOUR ordeal, he was left barely conscious and close to death. Bleeding and vomiting and with a broken jaw and missing teeth, he was driven from a Basra camp and hurled off the truck. No one knows if he lived or died."

Byrne said that Soldier A "told how the young victim was hauled in suspected of stealing from the docks" in Basra.

Soldier A said, "You pick on a man and go for him. Straightaway he gets a beating, a couple of punches and kicks to put him down. Then he was dragged to the back of the vehicle. As we took him back he was getting a beating. He was hit with batons on the knees, fingers, toes, elbows, and head.

"You normally try to leave off the face until you're in camp. If you pull up with black eyes and bleeding faces you could be in s**t. So its body shots—scaring him, saying 'We're going to kill you.' A lot of them cry and p*** themselves. Because it was so hot we put him in the back of a four-tonner truck which has a canopy over it. That's where the photos were taken. Lads were taking turns giving him a right going over, smashing him in the face with weapons and stamping on him. We had him for about eight hours. You could see blood coming out early from the first 'digs.' He was p****d on and there was spew.

"We took his mask off to give him some water and let him have a rest for 10 minutes. He could only speak a few words, pleading 'No, mister.' 'No, mister.' I did less than the others. But I joined in. Me and my mate calmed down. Then two lads come on and it starts again. He was missing teeth. All his mouth was bleeding and his nose was all over the place. He couldn't talk, his jaw was out. He's had a good few hours of a kicking. He was on his way to being killed. There's only so much you can take."

The soldier told the *Mirror* that at this point an officer told them, "Get rid of him—I haven't seen him."

The article also reports that just weeks after the above attack took place, another captive Iraqi was allegedly beaten to death in custody by soldiers from the same regiment.

This second attack in September 2003, was related to the *Mirror* by Solider B. He said of the death, "It was only a matter of time. We had one who fought back. I thought 'Don't do that,' it's the worst thing you can do. He got such a kicking. You could hear your mate's boots hitting this lad's spine. One of the lads broke his wrist on a prisoner's head. Another nearly broke his foot, kicking him."

The soldier claims that troops were then instructed by senior officials to destroy incriminating evidence. He said, "We got a warning, saying the Military Police had found a video of people throwing prisoners off a bridge. It wasn't 'Don't do it' or 'Stop it.' It was 'Get rid of it.'"

The Royal Military Police are to investigate the allegations

in the UK and the southern Iraqi city of Basra and in Cyprus, where the Queen's Lancashire Regiment is located.

The army, the media and the government have attempted to shift the focus of the scandal onto the *Mirror* newspaper, claiming that its editor Piers Morgan was guilty of rushing into print without adequately verifying his story.

Army sources at the regiment, several former commanders and army intelligence officers including Colonel Bob Stewart, a former United Nations commander of British troops in Bosnia, have attempted to rubbish the photographic evidence. Baseless assertions such as the claim that the boot laces of soldiers in the photographs were tied wrongly were widely reported and given credibility by the majority of the British press. The *Sun* newspaper ran a banner front page headline proclaiming "Iraq photos are fake"

In parliament on May 5, Prime Minister Tony Blair warned the *Mirror* that that if the photos were found to be fakes, it would be "extremely serious." On the same day, it was announced that Morgan had been "invited" to attend a session of questioning by the parliamentary defence select committee.

Bruce George, chairman of the Commons Defence Committee, said that they would seek to establish from Morgan, "Was there any payment made? Is he convinced these pictures are genuine? What efforts did he make to ensure these pictures were genuine?"

The committee said, "It will enable us to satisfy ourselves whether he and his staff have acted responsibly in how they have handled this matter. We will hold this session in the context of our already announced inquiry into the continuing operations in Iraq."

The *Mirror* has stood by its story, as have the soldiers who submitted the accounts. The newspaper has refused to identify its sources, but has turned over the 20 photographs to the inquiry.

On May 7, the *Times* newspaper was forced to admit, "If the pictures are fake, it is taking a long time to prove." Moreover, all attempts to deny that such atrocities have been committed are based on a belief that members of the public have the memory of a goldfish.

The May 1 *Mirror* article was not the first example of photographic evidence showing UK troops abusing and torturing Iraqi captives in a degrading, sadistic manner. In May of last year, staff at a British photo-processing shop handed over photographs to the police that revealed British troops torturing and sexually abusing Iraqi prisoners of war. Those photographs, published by the *Sun*, showed Iraqi prisoners strung up in a net from a fork lift truck. An investigation was launched by the Ministry of Defence, but it has yet to report.

On May 3, Amnesty International announced that it had

uncovered a "pattern of torture" of Iraqi prisoners by US and UK coalition troops, and called for an independent investigation into the allegations of brutality and abuse. The organisation said it had received "scores" of reports of ill treatment of detainees by British and American troops.

Amnesty said, "Many detainees have alleged they were tortured and ill-treated by US and UK troops during interrogation. Methods often reported include prolonged sleep deprivation; beatings; prolonged restraint in painful positions, sometimes combined with exposure to loud music; prolonged hooding and exposure to bright lights. Virtually none of the allegations of torture or ill-treatment has been adequately investigated."

The inquiry referred to by the Commons Defence Committee is into the ever-growing list of civilian deaths, injuries or ill treatment allegedly caused by the actions of UK troops in Iraq. Some 33 cases have so far been brought forward. Seven deaths are acknowledged to have been at the hands of British troops in Iraq over the past year, yet no disciplinary action has been taken against any soldier and no soldier has been charged. Twelve cases are still ongoing, while 21 are completed. Of those that are closed, the inquiry has found that there was "no case to answer" in 15 cases. In the other six cases, recommendations are still being considered. The Ministry of Defence has refused to release further details of any of its investigations.

More evidence regarding the brutality of British soldiers in Iraq is also set to emerge over the coming weeks and months. On the very day that Morgan was summoned to appear before the committee, lawyers for 12 Iraqi families who claim relatives were killed by British troops in Iraq lodged papers at the High Court in the UK to demand compensation.

The lawyers are requesting an independent inquiry to make the Ministry of Defence accept legal responsibility for the deaths. The cases are set to establish in law whether the UK armed forces in occupation are subject to the Human Rights Act 1998. One of the solicitors involved, Phil Shiner, said he expected there would eventually be a total of 17 Iraqi families seeking damages under human rights legislation.



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