Britain: Blair and Hoon plead ignorance of human rights abuses in Iraq

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12 May 2004

The British government's corruption and cynicism were on full display in parliament on Monday May 10. Defence Secretary Geoffrey Hoon sought to fend off charges that he had ignored allegations of abuse of Iraqi prisoners by British and American forces, claiming that he had not read the reports until "recently."

For more than a week, the government had tried to lay low as dozens of horrendous images were published of US soldiers gleefully humiliating and torturing helpless Iraqi detainees.

Every effort was made to portray the photographs as the outcome of a few rogue elements in the US army, and to claim that British forces would never descend to such depths.

Such claims were undermined by photographs published in the *Daily Mirror* allegedly showing British soldiers abusing Iraqi detainees.

The photographs had forced Deputy Defence Minister Adam Ingram to make a statement to parliament last week, in which he denied that he had received any reports about prisoner abuses. That elicited a rebuttal from the International Committee of the Red Cross ICRC), which said it had sent a report to the government earlier this year detailing how coalition forces were breaking the Geneva Convention in Iraq and that it had held several meetings with leaders of the coalition, urging them to end the widespread ill treatment of those in its custody.

The confidential report, much of which has now been leaked, mainly dealt with abuses by US forces, but also included specific criticisms of areas under British command. These included the case of nine men arrested by British forces in Basra on September 13 who 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."

The report says the men were later "severely beaten" by coalition troops.

"One of the arrestees died following the ill-treatment.... Prior to his death, his co-arrestees heard him screaming and asking for assistance."

Two of those arrested were placed in hospital with "severe injuries."

The report also raised criticisms about interrogation methods at Umm Qasr camp, run jointly by US and UK forces, which included the use of hoods and flexi-cuffs.

Amnesty International also disclosed that it had warned the government last May that prisoners were being tortured.

It had sent a letter to the Ministry of Defence last year detailing the death of one Iraqi prisoner at the hands of British troops. Amnesty had met Defence and Foreign Office officials in June over the matter and had sent another memo detailing the mistreatment of prisoners in July, and a letter to Hoon in October.

That month, the government had replied promising an investigation into the allegations, but this "secretive" study had been published by an arm of the defence forces, the Royal Military Police.

British claims to have known nothing about the type of depraved torture techniques being used by the US forces, as depicted in the so-called "trophy pictures" taken at Abu Ghraib prison, were further undermined by reports in the *Observer* newspaper.

This revealed that British military intelligence officers were at the jail when the first reports of torture came to light. The newspaper said that the Ministry of Defence had confirmed that three "military personnel" had been stationed at the prison between January and April of this year, and that the intelligence service MI6 had also visited the jail regularly.

"The revelations threaten to drag the British government into the heart of the international scandal over coalition abuse at Abu Ghraib," the paper stated.

This was the context in which Hoon finally appeared in

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parliament to answer the allegations—and where he sought to defend himself and the government by claiming ignorance.

He had not read the ICRC report until it was leaked because it was an "interim" document, Hoon said, which had been passed to Britain in confidence by the US head of the coalition, Paul Bremer, in February. Copies also went to Sir Jeremy Greenstock, the UK military representative in Iraq, and the Permanent Joint Headquarters in London. Officials there had decided that as the issues relating to British forces were being dealt with, ministers did not need to know, Hoon claimed.

Blair took the same tack, telling reporters, "I have not seen this document. But let me make it clear my understanding is the two issues that are raised by the Red Cross document in respect of abuses of Iraqi prisoners, there is one specific case on that issue and those were actually dealt with."

Hoon's and Blair's claims are transparent. Just one year ago, photographs depicting British soldiers torturing Iraqi detainees came to public attention when a photographic developer raised the alarm. These depicted an Iraqi prisoner suspended from a forklift truck, and another of a prisoner apparently forced to perform oral sex on his jailer. Although at least six British soldiers have been under investigation for the assaults, none have yet been charged.

Last week, lawyers acting on behalf of 12 Iraqi families took their case to the London High Court, charging British armed forces with murdering their relatives in separate, unprovoked instances. A subsequent report by Amnesty International has listed 33 cases of civilian deaths, injuries or ill treatment in Iraq, including the shooting death of an eight-year-old girl.

Despite his denials in parliament of these widespread abuses, Hoon unintentionally confirmed that he had known British troops were behaving illegally when he claimed that the army had been instructed in September to end the "hooding" of Iraqi prisoners under their control, breaking a 30-year ban on the practice.

Having washed his hands of any responsibility for events, Hoon sought to divert attention entirely from the government and its armed forces, by attacking the *Mirror* for publishing its photographs.

The newspaper has been singled out for opprobrium by the government and much of the media for publishing the photographs as well as the accounts of several soldiers backing up the torture allegations. But after almost two weeks, neither the government nor the army has been able to prove the photographs are fake. Nor was Hoon able to do so in parliament. His efforts to turn the tables on his accusers focused on the claim that there were "strong indications" that a truck seen in the pictures was not used in Iraq. Later, when pressed on Channel Four, Hoon stated categorically that the photos were fake.

Hoon's evasions have only deepened the government's crisis. His denials, if taken at face value, only mean that British officials willfully covered over hundreds of complaints regarding the actions of US and British forces—proving once again that the government is prepared to swallow anything in order to defend its decision to go to war and its alliance with the US. And more worrying for sections of the British establishment, these compaints would prove that the government really has no control over events in Iraq and that it is simply being dragged along in America's wake and into a bloody quagmire.

The efforts of the government and the media to exonerate Britain's armed forces of allegations of systematic and willful abuse still leave Blair and company guilty by their association with Washington. Having insisted that his support for US military intervention was the right course, despite massive public opposition, and having justified it continuously ever since, the prime minister is regarded even by his allies as the joint architect of the present disaster in Iraq.

In the last few days, speculation has become routine that Blair may have to be pushed to one side, with former Labour Minister Denis Healy and the film director (and the prime minister's close personal friend) Lord Puttnam only the latest to say he must step down.

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