

US torture in Iraq, Afghanistan: Authorized at the highest levels

David Walsh
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Recent revelations about torture and abuse in Iraq have made several things clear: such horrific mistreatment was authorized at the highest levels of the US government and military, it was more widespread and pervasive than previously acknowledged and it was reported to military authorities months earlier than has been claimed.

A variety of reports point to the role of the military high command—including General Ricardo Sanchez, the senior US military official in Iraq, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and even White House staff—in approving and organizing torture of Iraqi detainees.

Documents obtained by the *Washington Post* make clear that in September 2003 Gen. Sanchez approved a series of techniques borrowed from the US detention center in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and gave officials at Abu Ghraib prison carte blanche to use them whenever they wished. The 32 measures included sleep and sensory deprivation, the use of military dogs to terrify prisoners, temperature extremes and diets of bread and water.

After objections from officials at US Central Command in Florida, on October 12 Sanchez removed several items from the list of actions jail officials could use at their own discretion. To take away prisoners' religious items, control their exposure to light, inflict "pride and ego down" or allow prisoners to believe that interrogators came from countries that deal brutally with detainees now required the general's direct approval!

However, military officials on the spot could still take a prisoner to a less hospitable location for interrogation, manipulate his or her diet, use military dogs to provoke fear and require an individual to remain in a "stress position" for as long as 45 minutes.

Officials told the *Post* that Sanchez approved one of the more severe techniques, long-term isolation, 25 times after the modified October rules were put in place.

In any event, military personnel at Abu Ghraib told army investigators that they were not told about the changes in procedure. They reportedly said that for all intents and purposes there were no standard operating interrogation procedures at the prison.

The *Post* also describes an October 9 memorandum on "Interrogation Rules of Engagement," which each military intelligence officer at Abu Ghraib was obliged to sign, as specifying methods "that were close to some of the behavior criticized this March by the Army's own investigator, who said he found evidence of 'sadistic, blatant and wanton criminal abuse' at the prison." In other words, Sanchez—who is stepping down at the end of June—and the US military high command specifically outlined and endorsed methods of torture that the Bush administration and Pentagon officials are now characterizing as the work of a few perverted individuals.

A spokeswoman for Human Rights Watch noted that "dietary manipulation" is "a clear violation of the Geneva Conventions, which require daily food rations to have enough quantity, quality and variety to maintain good health, prevent weight loss and prevent nutritional

deficiencies." Frightening prisoners with attack dogs is also a violation of the Geneva Conventions.

The *Daily Telegraph* in Britain reported June 13 that four confidential Red Cross documents implicating senior Pentagon officials in the Abu Ghraib abuse have been handed to a US television network, which is preparing to air their contents shortly. The *Telegraph* wrote that according to lawyers familiar with the reports they will contradict claims by military spokesmen that the torture at Abu Ghraib was isolated.

One lawyer, Scott Horton, the former chairman of the New York Bar Association, told the newspaper, "There are some extremely damaging documents around, which link senior figures to the abuses. The biggest bombs in the case have yet to be dropped."

Rumsfeld's name has come up because he, along with other top Pentagon officials, is now known to have personally approved a menu of torture options developed for use at Guantanamo.

According to documents made public by the *Wall Street Journal*, in December 2002 Rumsfeld approved of a list of techniques for Guantanamo that included putting prisoners in "stress positions" for four hours, hooding them and subjecting them to 20-hour interrogations, "fear of dogs" and "mild, non-injurious physical contact." The list was so severe that military officers complained and the defense secretary was obliged to order a high-level review of interrogation policy.

In April 2003 Rumsfeld approved a new list, which included the use of at least six techniques—including the use of dogs—also contained in the October 9 Abu Ghraib memorandum. According to the Bush administration's twisted logic, detainees in Iraq were covered by the Geneva Conventions, while the prisoners at the Cuban concentration camp were not.

The immediate background to the importation of Guantanamo techniques to Baghdad in October 2003 was apparently a visit paid to Iraq by Maj. Gen. Geoffrey Miller—then in charge of the Cuban camp—in early September, accompanied by at least 11 senior aides, including CIA and Defense Intelligence Agency officials.

One of the more intriguing news items in recent days appeared in the June 9 *Washington Post*. It reported that Lt. Col. Steven L. Jordan, the head of the interrogation center at the Abu Ghraib prison, told an army investigator in February that he understood some of the information being extracted from prisoners had been requested by "White House staff."

In his statement, Jordan, an army reservist, explained that a superior military intelligence officer told him that the requested information concerned "any anti-coalition issues, foreign fighters, and terrorist issues." The investigator, the now famous Maj. Gen. Antonio M. Taguba, asked Jordan whether the information concerned "sensitive issues," and Jordan replied, "Very sensitive. Yes, sir." Taguba did not pursue the matter.

An army summary in May revealed a widespread pattern of abuse in Iraq and Afghanistan involving more military units and locations than previously known or acknowledged.

The report, for example, documents the deaths of two prisoners in one week in December 2002 at what was known as the Bagram Collecting Point. Both deaths were ruled homicides within days, but no one involved has yet been charged or disciplined. Significantly, personnel from the unit in charge of interrogation at Bagram, the 519th Military Intelligence Battalion, were later assigned to Iraq and specifically to the Joint Interrogation and Debriefing Center at Abu Ghraib.

The cases in Iraq date from the immediate aftermath of the overthrow of the Saddam Hussein regime to April 2004, when a detainee in the hands of Navy commandos died from “blunt force trauma to the torso and positional asphyxia.”

In the face of the outcry prompted by the Abu Ghraib scandal, the military has increased the scope and scale of the whitewash of the crimes its forces have carried out. The army has announced that it is investigating the deaths of 127 prisoners in Iraq and Afghanistan and that a four-star general may be put in charge of the investigation. A subordinate is not permitted to question an officer of greater rank. A four-star general, for example, could examine Sanchez.

How many Iraqis and Afghans have died in US hands remains an open question. The failure of US officials to comply with the Geneva Convention requirement that detainees be allowed to notify family members, within a week of their arrest, of their location and state of health has resulted, in the words of the Red Cross, in the “de facto ‘disappearance’” of many prisoners.

Hannah Allam of Knight-Ridder reported recently, for example, that “American administrators have lost track of dozens of detainees inside Abu Ghraib in the past year, according to human-rights workers, former inmates, a former prison investigator, attorneys, detainees’ families and prisoner-rights groups.” Many of the 3,200 prisoners at Abu Ghraib cannot be traced by anxious relatives because of sloppy bookkeeping and official indifference, or perhaps for more sinister reasons.

It has also come to light that the systemic torture and abuse were reported to military officials months before whistle blower Spc. Joseph Darby reported the goings-on to army investigators in January 2004.

The *Associated Press* reports that at least five soldiers objected to what they saw at Abu Ghraib last autumn. One in particular, Spc. Matthew C. Wisdom, demanded to be reassigned, telling superiors that the behavior he witnessed “made me sick to my stomach.” Wisdom reported that he had seen some of the abuses November 8, the night prisoners were forced to masturbate and arrange themselves in a pyramid of naked bodies.

The *New York Times* reported June 14 that “Beginning in November [2003], a small unit of interrogators at Abu Ghraib prison began reporting allegations of prisoner abuse, including the beatings of five blindfolded Iraqi generals, in internal documents sent to senior officers.

“We were reporting it long before this mess came out,” said one of several military intelligence soldiers interviewed in Germany and the United States who asked not to be identified for fear they would jeopardize their careers. At least 20 accounts of mistreatment were included in the documents, according to those interviewed.”

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Military higher-ups ignored the numerous reports for one simple reason: torture and abuse were US government and military policy, instigated and approved at the top of the famous “chain of command.”

Lawyers for several of the low-level soldiers charged with abusing prisoners have threatened to force Rumsfeld, Sanchez and others to testify at their clients’ trials. The defense attorney for Spc. Charles Graner, Guy Womack, told the press that he wants military leaders to testify as to the orders given on the treatment of prisoners. “We’re going to prove the chain of command knew [the abuse] was going on and did nothing to countermand it,” the lawyer said.

Womack continued, “The government is trying to make it seem like

nobody approved of this or knew of this, and that it was seven rogue military policemen suddenly went crazy and flipped out. I’ll be able to prove that’s a lie.” Womack says he is considering calling Rumsfeld as a witness and will definitely subpoena Stephen Cambone, undersecretary of defense for intelligence. He also plans to call three generals to testify: Sanchez, Miller and Brig. Gen. Janis Karpinski, who was in charge of Abu Ghraib at the time of the abuse.

The civilian lawyer for Sgt. Javal Davis of Roselle, New Jersey, Paul Bergrin, hopes to question present and former detainees to prove his client’s contention that senior military officers approved the mistreatment. “I’m going to go into Abu Ghraib and interview the detainees, determine the extent of the abuse, whether military intelligence officers were present and gave the orders,” Bergrin told the *Associated Press*. Bergrin has filed a motion seeking to have the case dismissed, citing “improper command influence” that extended all the way to George W. Bush.

Two 19-year-old Marines were convicted in courts-martial May 14 of subjecting an Iraqi prisoner to electrical shocks. Annoyed by the detainee’s talking loudly and throwing trash out of his cell, the two Marines attached wires to a power converter and pressed the wires against the man when he returned from a trip to the bathroom, “jolting him with 110 volts of electricity,” according to the *Marine Corps Times*. Two other Marines are facing trial in connection with abuse of prisoners at a temporary holding facility south of Baghdad in early April.

British Attorney General Lord Goldsmith announced June 14 that four British soldiers will face courts-martial in connection with assault and indecent assault on prisoners. Goldsmith said there was photographic evidence of the episode.

More details of the US military savagery in Iraq have emerged in recent weeks. The *New York Times* ran an extensive piece June 8 on the “pervasive” use of “forced nudity” against Iraqi prisoners. Such practices were so widespread “in the military intelligence unit of Abu Ghraib ... that soldiers later said they had not seen ‘the whole nudity thing,’ as one captain called it, as abusive or out of the ordinary.”

The *Times* cited these examples: “Detainees were paraded naked past other prisoners and guards; some were ordered to do jumping jacks and sing ‘The Star-Spangled Banner’ in the nude, according to a several witnesses. Also, a father and his grown son were stripped, then forced to stand and stare at each other. The International Committee of the Red Cross, visiting in October, found prisoners left naked in their cells for days, modestly trying to shield themselves behind cardboard from meals-ready-to-eat boxes.”

The article notes, almost in passing, that “Soldiers in Nazi Germany paraded naked prisoners in daylight, and human rights groups have documented the use of nudity during conflicts in Egypt, Chile and Turkey, and in Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation.”

Dog handlers at Abu Ghraib have described in some detail the uses to which their animals were put, according to the *Washington Post*. Sergeants Michael Smith and Santos Cardona told army investigators that in December 2002 and January 2003 military intelligence personnel requested several times that they bring their dogs—trained to hunt for weapons, explosives and contraband—to assist in interrogating detainees. The high-ranking intelligence officers allegedly ordered guards to use unmuzzled dogs to frighten prisoners. Several photos of such treatment have been made public, with terrified detainees recoiling from snarling dogs whose muzzles are only inches away.

The two handlers apparently had a contest to see who could use their dogs to frighten more Iraqis into urinating on themselves.

Another dog handler, Master-at-Arms 1st Class William Kimbro, reported that military interrogators threatened prisoners with allowing Kimbro’s barking dog to be set on them. The navy dog handler walked out. “I was leaving because this is not what my dog is trained for. We do not use our dogs for interrogation purposes,” Kimbro said in a statement.

The US military has announced that after the restoration of “full sovereignty” to the interim Iraqi government it will continue to operate Abu Ghraib and hold between 4,000 and 5,000 Iraqi prisoners.

The Red Cross pointed out that the transition to the new Iraqi government should mean the release of all Iraqi prisoners of war and interned civilians. “If we consider that the occupation ends June 30, that would mean it’s the end of the international armed conflict,” pointed out Nadra Doumani, a Red Cross spokeswoman. She acknowledged, however, that “the situation on the ground determines the facts.”



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