

US army officially whitewashes Abu Ghraib torture

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When they emerged this spring, the revelations of torture of Iraqi detainees at the hands of the US military at Abu Ghraib and other prisons in Iraq outraged world opinion. Even in the partially censored and muted form in which they appeared, the facts were horrifying. The photographs of naked Iraqi detainees that followed—hooded, threatened by attack dogs, sexually humiliated—only deepened the horror.

The army's own internal investigation, carried out by Major General Antonio Taguba, found the abuses to be "systemic." The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) report found widespread violations of international law, as well as many cases of abuse and torture, both mental and physical.

The ICRC found that "prisoners were kept naked in empty cells [...] male prisoners were forced to wear women's underwear [...] prisoners were beaten by coalition forces, in one case leading to death [...] coalition forces fired on unarmed prisoners multiple times from watch towers, killing some of them."

Amnesty International and other human rights bodies also documented the torture and humiliation of Iraqi prisoners. The record is perfectly clear.

These illegal acts carried out by the US military personnel and contractors against Iraqi and Afghan prisoners were not an aberration. They were the inevitable product of a criminal colonialist enterprise, launched on the basis of crude lies advanced by the Bush administration.

Moreover, they were officially sanctioned and directed from the top. From the earliest days of the invasion of Afghanistan, a green light was given to the most backward and psychotic elements in the military to do their worst against detainees. The concentration camp at Guantanamo Bay was a further extension of the policy. Bush administration documents leaked to the press have revealed that government officials were carrying on an intense discussion as to the best means of legally justifying or legitimizing torture as early as 2001. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and others specifically and systematically disavowed the Geneva Conventions on the treatment of prisoners of war.

The practices at Abu Ghraib were horrifying, therefore, but they were not surprising. They were the result of quasi-official US government policy. All the hand-wringing by the American media cannot make that fact disappear.

Everyone in the world knows that the US military has carried out a bestial policy inside its prisons and detention centers. Now, in the face of the international outcry produced by the Abu Ghraib scandal, the Pentagon has brazenly issued a report that simply denies any significant criminal activity by its forces.

On July 22, the Army trotted out a 321-page summary of an investigation of "detainee operations" in Iraq and Afghanistan, finding that "the overwhelming majority of our leaders and Soldiers understand the requirement to treat detainees humanely and are doing so," given "an enemy who does not follow the Geneva Conventions."

The Army further stated that it was "unable to identify system failures that resulted in incidents of abuse." Rather, the incidents of abuse "should

be viewed as what they are—unauthorized actions taken by a few individuals."

Admitting that the military has rounded up and detained some 50,000 prisoners in Iraq and Afghanistan over the last two and a half years, the report, issued by the Army's inspector general, looked at 16 facilities in the region, as well as 10 in the continental United States, and stated that abuse cases were not a pattern and involved only a tiny percentage of the detainees.

"As of 9 June 2004, there were 94 cases of confirmed or possible abuse of any type, which include, theft, physical assault, sexual assault, and death... [t]hese actions, while regrettable, are aberrations when compared to the actions of fellow Soldiers who are serving with distinction." Of the 20 deaths considered confirmed or possible abuse, 10 occurred at prisons or other permanent holding facilities, 5 at collection points and 5 at the point of capture. Altogether, the report said 39 prisoners have died in US custody in Iraq and Afghanistan since the fall of 2001.

The inspector general's team did not investigate individual cases of abuse. It looked at the records of 125 reported cases and found that no abuse occurred in 31 of those. Of the rest, 54 cases remain "open or undetermined." The investigators claimed to have found no widespread evidence that unmuzzled dogs were used during interrogations or that ghost detainees were hidden from the Red Cross by order of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld—practices that were exposed in Taguba's report.

Taguba had found that between October and December of 2003, that there were numerous instances of "sadistic, blatant, and wanton criminal abuses" at Abu Ghraib.

Although the Army investigation insisted that any abuse cases were "isolated events," the report is internally contradictory in that it provides a glimpse into the subhuman conditions that exist inside the US-run prisons in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"Refuse and litter were seen within one of the Ganci compounds [one of the sections of Abu Ghraib]... There was approximately one portable latrine per 25 detainees and there was a contract in place to clean the latrines. There was, however, a bad smell throughout the area from sewage because disinfectant chemicals were not replaced in the latrines. According to sensing sessions, there were only 12 showerheads in each Ganci compound for 600 to 700 detainees. The detainees showered every other day, but the guards ran all 600 to 700 detainees through the process in two hours....

"We inspected I/R [internment and resettlement] facilities at Bagram [Afghanistan], Baghdad, and Camp Bucca [Iraq] and found only Abu Ghraib overcrowded, located near a densely populated urban area, on a dangerous main supply route, and subject to frequent hostile enemy fire from enemy mortars or rockets.... The supply of fresh water was difficult to maintain and the food-quality was sub-standard [contaminated with rodent droppings and dirt]. Detainees did not have access to bunkers or shelters with overhead cover to protect them from hostile enemy mortar or

rocket fire from outside the walls of Abu Ghraib.

“No units fully complied with the medical treatment of detainees or with the sanitary conditions of the detainee facilities.... There was a widespread lack of preventive medicine staffing, supplies, and equipment,” according to the report, which apparently did not consider these appalling conditions as falling within the parameters of prisoner abuse.

The report also gives new details about prisoner abuses, including evidence that troops conspired to make Iraqi prisoners jump off a bridge, that one interrogator hit a prisoner in the head and that a sergeant told subordinates to “rough up” detainees. “One final example is an incident where a Soldier had been talking extensively with others in his unit about wanting to kill an Iraqi. This soldier later shot and killed an Iraqi detainee who was flex-cuffed,” admits the survey.

In addition, the army inspectors found that nearly two thirds of the detainees were held in makeshift prison camps called collection points—comprising little more than concertina wire in the middle of the desert—for as long as 30 days. This is in violation of Army rules that restrict the lengths of stay in the collection points to 12 hours.

It was also disclosed that detainees had been in custody for as long as 90 days before being interrogated for the first time and that interviews with “Appeal & Review Board members, and Release Review Board members indicated they believed up to 80 percent of detainees being held for security and intelligence might be eligible for release upon review of their cases.”

Though 51 percent of the soldiers interviewed are described as having “poor morale,” no blame was assigned by the report to high-ranking officers. Vagueness in army policy—akin to the notorious “failure of intelligence” supposedly responsible for September 11—was the alleged source of the ‘isolated’ cases of prisoner abuse: “While the language of the approved policies could be viewed as a careful attempt to draw the line between lawful and unlawful conduct, the published instructions left considerable room for misapplication.”

This is nonsense. Although the US military has carried out atrocities—first, against the Native population in America and, later, colonial peoples abroad—for a very long time, it took the Bush administration to codify and rationalize torture and abuse. What the army report does not mention is that beginning in 2001, White House and Justice Department officials wrote rules of waging war and detaining prisoners intended to sidestep the Geneva Conventions (and official army policy) and protect the administration against war crimes allegations. The Afghan prisoner policy that treated al-Qaeda and Taliban fighters as “unlawful combatants,” unprotected by the conventions, carried over to Guantanamo Bay, then migrated to Iraq. There was no “misapplication”; there was a quite deliberate and concerted “application” of a criminal and inhumane policy.

The Army’s inspector general report is a transparent attempt at damage control. Its conclusions do not even conform to some of the findings buried inside the summary, which acknowledge that commanders in Iraq and Afghanistan ordered “high risk” interrogations on prisoners without adequate training, safeguards or application of the Geneva Conventions.

Even *New York Times* and *Washington Post* editorials were forced to admit that the timing of the report’s release—in the shadow of the findings of the 9/11 Commission—was intended to cloud its purpose as a blatant whitewash. The *Post* indignantly stated that the “Pentagon cannot be counted on to reliably or thoroughly investigate the prisoner abuse affair,” and the *Times* accused the Defense Department of “misplacing” thousands of pages of the Taguba report—“the only credible military account so far.”

Both papers, however, sprang forth to praise Chairman John Warner (R-Va.) and the Senate Armed Services Committee, which held a hastily called, closed-door hearing on the report. The *Times* praised Warner “for admirably resisting pressure from the White House and Republican leaders in Congress to stop his investigation,” but acknowledged that “he

is showing signs of losing appetite for the fight.”

Warner has held only three public hearings of his committee since May, summoning Defense Secretary Rumsfeld and other Pentagon officials to testify. For more than a month, Warner dropped the abuse scandal as he worked on passing the defense spending legislation. According to the Associated Press, Warner now states that because of the current criminal investigations, “We cannot in any way jeopardize the rights of individuals being investigated. And consequently, we cannot, at this time, bring them before the committee.” Seven soldiers have been charged with abusing detainees at Abu Ghraib. One has pleaded guilty and was sentenced to a year in prison and a dishonorable discharge.

Over the last two weeks, the ICRC revealed that the US might be hiding detainees in lockups around the world that the group’s representatives had not had access to, and, further, a German television magazine called “Report Mainz” recently aired ICRC accusations that more than 100 children are imprisoned in US-controlled detention centers, including Abu Ghraib.

Addressing an ACLU conference on July 8, Seymour Hersh, the *New Yorker* reporter who first broke the story of torture at Abu Ghraib, stated that he had seen photos and videotapes that the American media has not yet broadcast: “[B]asically what happened is that those women who were arrested with young boys, children, in cases that have been [video] recorded, the boys were sodomized, with the cameras rolling, and the worst above all of them is the soundtrack of the boys shrieking.... And this is your government at war.”

Contrary to the army’s inability to find any systemic problems of torture or abuse, Hersh describes the prison scene in Iraq as “a series of massive crimes, criminal activity by the president and the vice president—by the administration anyway,” abetted by the “tremendous amount of self-censorship among the press. It’s like a disease.”

In issuing such a transparent whitewash to the public, the Pentagon is expressing its arrogance and contempt for elementary democratic principles. The report is a declaration of the US military’s right to go anywhere in the world and terrorize the population without restriction. This goes hand in hand with Washington’s refusal to accept any international court’s jurisdiction over its activities. Moreover, the army releases such a report with the full confidence that no one in the Democratic Party or the American mass media, including its erstwhile liberal wing, will make any serious protest or call anyone to account.



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