

# US commanders stop troops from protecting Iraqi torture victims

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12 August 2004

Last June, senior US officers ordered American National Guard troops in Baghdad to withdraw from a prison where alleged insurgents were being subjected to sadistic torture by security forces of the newly installed interim government headed by Prime Minister Iyad Allawi.

The Oregon National Guardsmen came upon the scene of the torture and intervened to stop the abuse and protect the helpless victims. When word reached senior US officers of the Guardsmen's intervention, the order quickly came down for the American troops to leave the scene and abandon the prisoners to their fate. The soldiers were ordered to say nothing of the incident.

The episode occurred on June 29, the same day that Washington officially installed Allawi and his interim government in power as the supposedly "sovereign government" of Iraq. In practice, Allawi had been acting since the end of May as the front man for the US occupation, and his cabinet had assumed control of Iraq's Interior Ministry.

The US military's intervention to protect the torturers and abandon their victims says a great deal about the American occupation of Iraq. It gives the lie to the claims that the installation of the interim government represents a "transition to democracy" in Iraq, and demolishes the official US position on torture at US-run prisons such as Abu Ghraib—namely, that any incidences of prisoner abuse are aberrations carried out by a few "bad apples," and not the product of US policy decisions.

The June 29 episode was first reported on August 8 by the *Oregonian* newspaper, which published an extensive account based largely on testimonials from Guardsmen who were directly involved. The US soldiers, who had acted out of revulsion over the

treatment of the prisoners and an instinctive impulse of human decency, were bewildered and angered by the order from above to hand the prisoners back to those who were savagely abusing them. (See original at: <http://www.oregonlive.com/special/oregonian/iraq/index.ssf?/base/frontpage/109196614530740.xml>)

The incident has been barely reported by the major US media.

The report in the *Oregonian* was based on the written testimony of Captain Jarrell Southall of the 2nd Battalion, 162nd National Guard Infantry—a middle school teacher in civilian life—whose account was supported by other members of the unit. The author of the article is *Oregonian* reporter Mike Francis, who was embedded with the National Guard unit.

A sentry on guard duty observed and photographed through his telescopic sight the scene of men in plainclothes beating blindfolded and bound prisoners on the grounds of the Iraqi Interior Ministry. The *Oregonian* has published the photographs. They show numerous prisoners with bright red wounds covering large parts of their body.

The sentry radioed his battalion headquarters to report the abuse. According to the statements of one anonymous soldier, the distressed sentry threatened to begin shooting the torturers if something wasn't done.

According to Southall's written account, the commander of the 2nd/162nd, Lieutenant Colonel Daniel Hendrikson, assembled a detachment of his troops and entered the compound in force. The Iraqi Interior Ministry personnel backed down in the face of the US troops.

The Oregon Guardsmen found dozens of prisoners, in various degrees of stress, in the interior ministry courtyard. They moved the men into the shade, cut them loose from their bindings, and provided them with

water.

Southall wrote: “Many of these prisoners had bruises and cuts and belt or hose marks all over. I witnessed prisoners who were barely able to walk...” One prisoner, who had fresh bruises covering his back and legs, told the soldiers he was 14 years old.

US military police who arrived on the scene physically disarmed the prison guards and moved them away from the detainees. According to Southall, a “well-dressed obese man,” one of the Iraqi interior ministry personnel, attempted to tell Hendrikson that there “was no prisoner abuse and that everything was under control.”

Rejecting this claim, the Guardsmen searched the facility, leading them to “several small rooms within the building,” Southall recounted. “One room, about 20 by 20 feet squared, contained even more prisoners, all in the same sad shape as the prisoners found in the outer area. There were about 78 prisoners crowded in this little room, with no available furniture, no air conditioner, no water or food or restrooms available.”

In an office, the Guardsmen found a group of Interior Ministry personnel seated at a table. “There was a tightly bound and gagged prisoner at the feet of these men,” wrote Southall.

According to the Interior Ministry officers, the prisoners had been arrested three days before as part of a crackdown on crime in Baghdad, which had been ordered by Allawi. The Guardsmen were told by the Interior Ministry interrogators that the prisoners were “all dangerous criminals, and most were thieves, users of marijuana, and other types of bad people.”

Southall recounted that as the Guardsmen’s search produced further evidence of abuse and their anger rose, the prison guards began to get “defiant and hostile.” The US troops discovered within the complex “hoses, broken lamps and chemicals of some variety,” which they believed were being used to inflict the torture.

Hendrikson contacted his commanders in the Army First Infantry Division. To the shock of the Oregon Guardsmen, the order that came back to Hendrikson was to immediately withdraw his troops from the prison and return the custody of the prisoners to the interior ministry personnel. An unnamed soldier told *Oregonian* reporter Francis, “The guys were really upset.”

The Guardsmen do not know who in the US command gave the order to withdraw, and Hendrikson has thus far obeyed the gag order imposed on him by his superiors.

In response to questions from the *Oregonian*, the US embassy in Iraq confirmed that the incident occurred and issued a statement praising the National Guardsmen for “acting professionally and calmly to ease tensions and defend prisoners who needed help.”

The praise is utterly cynical. Not only were the soldiers ordered to stop protecting the prisoners and leave them in the hands of their tormentors, there is no report of an official protest by the US government to the Iraqi Interior Ministry, no suggestion of an investigation into the incident, and no indication that any of the torturers have been removed from their positions or charged with any wrongdoing.

The *Oregonian* report follows the allegations by two unnamed eyewitnesses, published July 17 in two Australian newspapers, the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Age*, that Allawi personally carried out the extra-judicial execution of six prisoners at the Al-Amariyah security center in Baghdad.

These charges against Allawi have been largely censored in the US media, in particular, by the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. Neither of these newspapers has reported the account by the Oregon National Guardsmen.



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