

Official documents vindicate Red Cross report on US torture

Richard Phillips
14 December 2004

When a confidential International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) report exposing the US military torture of prisoners at Guantánamo Bay in Cuba was published by the *New York Times* late last month Washington reacted with the usual combination of crude denials and legalistic justifications of its violations of the Geneva Conventions and international law.

At the same time, sections of the American media, including the *Wall Street Journal*, Rupert Murdoch's *New York Post* and the Fox television network, attempted to smear the ICRC. The 140-year-old human rights body was deemed to be anti-American and its motives "questionable". An editorial in the *Wall Street Journal* declared that the Red Cross had become "an ideological organisation unable to distinguish between good and bad", while the *New York Post* called for a funding boycott of the ICRC and its American affiliates.

Within days of these attacks, however, further evidence surfaced, this time from senior Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) officials and the Pentagon's own spy agency, the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), vindicating the Red Cross investigation.

According to an Associated Press report published on December 6, FBI officers witnessed US soldiers torturing Guantánamo Bay detainees in 2002, not long after prisoners captured in Afghanistan and Pakistan began being transported to the American military prison. Such was the level of abuse that a senior FBI counterterrorism officer wrote to the US military, concerned that FBI officers could be implicated in the illegal activity.

Three incidents were cited in a July 14 letter from Thomas Harrington, deputy assistant director of the FBI's counterterrorism division, to the head of the US Army's Criminal Investigation Command, Major General Donald J. Ryder. Harrington wrote that one interrogator had abused prisoners so severely that they often ended up "curling into a fetal position on the floor and crying in pain".

One of the episodes described in Harrington's letter recall the sadism and sexual humiliation employed by the US

military on prisoners at Abu Ghraib prison near Baghdad. A female interrogator whispered in the ear of a handcuffed and shackled detainee, caressed him and then applied lotion to his arms. A Marine who witnessed the interrogation told an FBI officer that the interrogator later grabbed the detainee's thumbs and bent them backwards and also grabbed his genitals.

In September or October 2002, FBI agents witnessed a dog being used "in an aggressive manner to intimidate a detainee". A month later, they saw the same detainee "after he had been subjected to intense isolation for over three months, totally isolated in a cell that was always flooded by light".

"By late November," the report continued, "the detainee was evidencing behavior consistent with extreme psychological trauma... talking to nonexistent people, reported hearing voices (and) crouching in a corner of the cell covered with a sheet."

Harrington's letter said another FBI agent was observing an interrogation when a civilian contractor asked him to come and see something else. The FBI officer was taken to "an unknown bearded, long-haired detainee... [who] had been gagged with duct tape that covered much of his head". When the FBI agent asked an Army soldier why the man was being punished, he laughed and said the man was gagged because he had been "chanting the Koran and would not stop".

Harrington wrote that, although FBI officials had complained to Department of Defense attorneys about these "highly aggressive interrogation" methods in January 2003, the Army had taken no action over the complaints.

It is clear that the torture of prisoners in Guantánamo Bay, as well as Iraq, was not an aberration but an integral component of the Bush administration's so-called war on terror. Further evidence has emerged that the abuse referred to in Harrington's letter was authorised and encouraged at the highest government levels.

On December 7, a day after the Associated Press report, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) released dozens

of internal government documents on the treatment of American-held POWs in Iraq. The Bush administration waged a 12-month legal battle to prevent the ACLU, the Center for Constitutional Rights, Physicians for Human Rights and various military veterans groups obtaining the material under Freedom of Information laws.

The letters and emails, although heavily-censored, confirm that the US special operations task force TF 6-26, formerly known as TF 121, was involved in torturing the prisoners and that this continued after the exposure earlier this year that US forces had abused Abu Ghraib detainees.

While the Pentagon does not officially acknowledge TF 6-26, which consists of soldiers from Army special mission units and Navy SEALs under the command of a two-star general, the unit operates in Iraq and Afghanistan and is referred to as a “hunter-killer” group. It has been accused of using secret facilities to conduct its interrogations, and two of its officers are currently under criminal investigation over the death of two Iraqi prisoners.

The government documents reveal that TF 6-26 members not only tortured war prisoners but also tried to silence DIA personnel concerned about the clandestine military organisation’s methods.

One of the internal memos—a June 25 report from the director of Defense Intelligence Vice Admiral Lowell Jacoby to Stephen A. Cambone, the Undersecretary of Defense Intelligence—describes how TF 6-26 officers punched an Iraqi prisoner in the face so badly that he needed medical attention, failed to record the medical treatment and then confiscated DIA photos of the man’s injuries. Jacoby is the highest-ranking officer within the US military known to have raised concerns about torture.

DIA personnel who complained about these abuses were threatened, banned from some interrogation sessions, had their car keys confiscated and emails monitored. They were ordered “not to talk to anyone in the US” or leave the base “even to get a haircut”.

Other documents released by the ACLU include emails indicating some of the conflicts between the FBI and the Department of Defense (DOD) over interrogation methods. A December 2003 email observed that the FBI’s Military Liaison and Detainee Unit (MLDU), which had “a long-standing and documented position against the use of some of DOD’s interrogation practices”, had requested certain information “be documented to protect the FBI”.

Another terse email notes that Major General Geoffrey Miller, then commander of Guantánamo Bay, “continued to support interrogation strategies [that the FBI] not only advised against, but questioned against in terms of effectiveness”. One memo reported that an FBI official was shocked after he read an interview with Miller in *Stars and*

Stripes, the US military paper, in which Miller claimed that Guantánamo Bay interrogations were designed to establish a “rapport” with prisoners.

Miller ran Guantánamo Bay from October 2002 until March 2004, before his appointment to Abu Ghraib. Miller first visited Abu Ghraib in 2003 and told Army commanders there to “Gitmotise” the Iraqi prison in order to extract more information from detainees. This meant the introduction of “stress and duress” techniques widely employed at Guantánamo, such as sleep deprivation, beatings, stripping detainees naked, shackling prisoners in painful positions to the floor, and subjecting them to extremes of temperature and prolonged loud music,

Correspondence from DIA agents to their superiors reported that they saw many Iraqi prisoners stripped naked and placed in solitary confinement at Abu Ghraib. One officer said he saw a prisoner, who was handcuffed to a railing with a sack over his head and a shower curtain draped around him, being slapped by a soldier to keep him awake.

Last week, the Pentagon announced that four TF 6-26 officers had been punished for “unauthorised” use of high-powered Taser stun guns during the interrogation of Iraqi detainees. The prisoners had “burn marks” on their backs and complained of kidney pain after being grilled by the Special Forces unit. According to Amnesty International, the stun guns, which are used extensively by US forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, have killed more than 74 people in North America since their introduction in 2001.

While these revelations are no surprise—the Bush administration made clear from the outset that the Geneva Conventions would not apply to prisoners captured in its “war on terror”—they demonstrate that the torture of prisoners and other war crimes were so brutal that key members of the military and police apparatus felt compelled to voice concerns.

But as the latest documents reveal, this disquiet, even from high-level FBI and DIA officials, who have no fundamental differences with the illegal detention of prisoners in Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay, was simply brushed aside by the Pentagon and its shadowy Special Forces.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact