David Hicks details abuse in Guantánamo Bay

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An affidavit by David Hicks, a 29-year-old Australian citizen captured in Afghanistan and held by the US military since December 2001, was released last week by his lawyers during legal action in the US courts. Dated August 5, it is the first statement by a current detainee in Guantánamo Bay on the abuse of prisoners and adds to the mountain of evidence about Bush administration's criminal actions in the notorious jail.

Hicks is one of four Guantánamo Bay prisoners formally charged on allegations of terrorist activity and due to face trial early next year. He explained that he was "beaten before, after, and during interrogations... [and] threatened, directly and indirectly, with firearms and other weapons before and during interrogations" during his three-year detention.

He also heard the bashing of other detainees during interrogations and saw their injuries. He states that he has been hit in the face, head, feet, and torso with hands, fists and other objects, including rifle butts.

"At one point, a group of detainees, including myself, was subjected to being randomly hit over a eight-hour session while handcuffed and blindfolded," he said. His head was rammed into the ground several times.

While the Bush administration and the Howard government still claim that prisoners are not tortured in Guantánamo Bay, Hicks' affidavit demonstrates, yet again, that physical and psychological abuse is part of the jail's standard operating procedure. It also confirms statements by British detainees released this year that dogs were used to terrorise prisoners—methods later employed in Abu Ghraib in Iraq.

"I have witnessed the activities of the Internal Reaction Force (hereinafter 'IRF'), which consists of a squad of soldiers that enter a detainee's cell and brutalise him with the aid of an attack dog. The IRF invasions were so common that the term to be 'IRF'ed' became part of the language of the detainees. I have seen detainees suffer serious injuries as a result of being IRF'ed. I have seen detainees IRF'ed while they were praying, or for refusing medication."

Hicks stated that he was deprived of sleep as a "matter of policy", forcibly injected with unknown sedatives—his requests for information about the drugs ignored—and beaten while under their influence. He was handcuffed so tightly, and for up to 15 hours at a time, that his hands became numb and remained that way for a considerable period. He was regularly forced to run in leg shackles that ripped the skin off his ankles.

Military officers repeatedly told Hicks that he would be sent home if he assisted them. Failure to cooperate meant the loss of necessities, such as showers, sufficient food, and access to reading material, including receiving mail.

"I was told there was an 'easy way' and a 'hard way' to respond to interrogation," he said. "Interrogators once offered me the services of a prostitute for fifteen minutes if I would spy on other detainees. I refused." He said interrogators attempted to turn other prisoners against him by spreading false rumours.

"I have also heard that religious detainees were exposed to pornography," he said, "and were dragged around naked in order to break their will." Food was withheld from detainees during Ramadan.

"Cooperation with interrogators," Hicks stated, "offered the only means of relief from the miserable treatment and abuse the detainees suffered. Those who failed to comply suffered abuse until they gave in."

Hicks was moved to Camp Echo on July 9, 2003 and held in solitary confinement. He stated that he lost 30 pounds that year and was not allowed outside his cell for exercise in the sunlight until March 10, 2004.

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Hicks said he repeatedly asked for a lawyer during interrogations and questioned why he "was not being treated as prisoner of war". He protested his mistreatment to American military officials on several occasions—in Afghanistan and Guantánamo Bay—and told Red Cross representatives about the abuse.

The statement emphasised that it was only an "outline of the abuse and mistreatment" he "received, witnessed, and/or heard about" while jailed by the US military and that he could provide additional details if requested by US legal authorities.

Pentagon officials responded to media questions about Hicks last week by claiming that his allegations had already been investigated and dismissed. It provided no specific information, however, about its so-called "inquiry".

In Australia, Attorney-General Philip Ruddock, aided by perfunctory coverage in the local press, claimed that Hicks' accusations contradicted previous statements by his lawyers.

"[Their declarations] also suggested that while he was at Guantánamo Bay there were no allegations ... other than I think deprivation of his liberty and like matters ... We have been told by the Americans that (Hicks) is being treated humanely and we have visited him on a number of occasions with foreign affairs consular officials, who report that they have no signs of abuse," Ruddock said.

These claims are both cynical and absurd.

As well as consistently protesting his treatment to the US military and the Red Cross, Hicks has given Australian foreign affairs officials and intelligence officers who have visited him details of his abuse by the American military.

The Howard government has suppressed these reports, publicly denounced Hicks as a "dangerous terrorist" and given Washington a virtual blank cheque in the treatment of him. It has also mounted a high-level legal action to prevent Hicks' lawyers and his family, and journalists, gaining Freedom of Information access to relevant information, including correspondence between Canberra and Washington on Hicks' incarceration.

Moreover, Ruddock knows that Hicks' lawyers are banned from making public statements about the treatment of any prisoner, including their own client, in Guantánamo Bay. They can be removed from the case and barred from the prison if they violate this ruling. These restrictions, which contravene international law, the US Constitution and previous US military law, were established when the Pentagon commissioned the military tribunals.

Contrary to Ruddock's claims, Hicks' testimony is a convincing account of his treatment by the American military, which is confirmed by the almost daily exposures of US torture in Iraq, Afghanistan and Guantánamo Bay. The sadistic abuse of war prisoners is not an aberration or confined to a few "bad apples" in the US armed forces but the inevitable product of the Bush administration's global "war on terror".

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