

International Red Cross charges systematic abuse

Bush's "Torture Inc." at Guantanamo

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A confidential report by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) charges that the American military has intentionally engaged in methods "tantamount to torture" against prisoners at the US detention camp in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

The report is the result of a nearly month-long visit of the ICRC last June to Camp Delta at Guantanamo. It alleges that US interrogators not only used psychological and physical coercion, but also enlisted the participation of medical personnel in what the report called "a flagrant violation of medical ethics."

A memo quoting from the report and detailing its findings has been leaked to the *New York Times* and was reported in the newspaper's Tuesday edition. It was previously distributed to lawyers at the White House, Pentagon and State Department and to the commander of the prison camp at Guantanamo.

The Bush administration quickly dismissed the Red Cross allegations. Asked about the charges, a Pentagon spokesman provided the usual pat response to charges of US abuse of prisoners: "The United States operates a safe, humane and professional detention operation at Guantanamo that is providing valuable information in the war on terrorism." The Pentagon assured that Guantanamo personnel "go through extensive professional and sensitivity training to ensure they understand the procedures for protecting the rights and dignity of detainees."

US government and military officials, however, have made no attempt to refute any of the Red Cross's specific allegations. In both its detail and scope, the report stands as the most damning indictment to date of the institutionalized and government-sanctioned use of torture by US interrogators against detainees branded "enemy combatants" in the so-called "war on terror."

According to information obtained by the *Times*,

doctors and other medical personnel worked directly with military officials at Guantanamo, conveying data about prisoners' "mental health and vulnerabilities." This information was usually communicated through a group called the Behavioral Science Consultation Team, or B.S.C.T., known informally as "Biscuit," which is comprised of psychologists and other psychology professionals.

The Biscuit team met regularly with the medical staff at Guantanamo to discuss the medical conditions of prisoners, the report said. Such "apparent integration of access to medical care with the system of coercion," the report stated, meant that detainees may learn from their interrogators that they have intimate knowledge of their medical histories. As a result, prisoners no longer trust doctors and others to whom their treatment is entrusted. Instead, these medical professionals become part of the torture and interrogation machine. Their chief function is not the medical care of prisoners, but assisting interrogators in extracting information.

Leonard S. Rubenstein, executive director of Physicians for Human Rights, commented on this practice to the *Times*: "The use of medical personnel to facilitate abusive interrogations places them in an untenable position and violates international ethical standards." He added, "We need to know more about these practices, including whether health professionals engaged in calibrating levels of pain inflicted on detainees."

This enlistment of doctors in the service of the torture of prisoners is hauntingly reminiscent of the work of Dr. Josef Mengele, the Nazis' "Angel of Death" at Auschwitz. Nor is there any reason to assume that the methods cited by the ICRC are restricted to Guantanamo, and are not employed by the US at its prison camps worldwide.

The International Committee of the Red Cross has been conducting visits to Guantanamo since January 2002. More than a year ago, the ICRC stated publicly that the indefinite detention of prisoners, who had no idea when or if they would be released, would lead to mental health problems. The organization's June visit confirmed this, and also uncovered a system designed to break the will of the approximately 550 prisoners at the camp.

According to the report, the methods used had become "more refined and repressive" than those witnessed by the ICRC on previous visits. Interrogators reportedly seek to make detainees dependent upon them through "humiliating acts, solitary confinement, temperature extremes, use of forced positions." Prisoners were exposed to loud and incessant noise and music and were subjected to "some beatings."

The report added: "The construction of such a system, whose stated purpose is the production of intelligence, cannot be considered other than an intentional system of cruel, unusual and degrading treatment and a form of torture."

The *Times* article cites other sources corroborating these charges. Last month, the newspaper interviewed military guards, intelligence agents and others who worked at Camp Delta in Guantanamo and who described "a range of procedures that they said were highly abusive occurring over a long period."

"One regular procedure," the *Times* writes, "was making uncooperative prisoners strip to their underwear, having them sit in a chair while shackled hand and foot to a bolt in the floor, and forcing them to endure strobe lights and loud rock and rap music played through two close loudspeakers, while the air-conditioning was turned up to maximum levels."

The Bush administration defends methods that are clearly prohibited under both international law and US statutes which bar abusive or degrading treatment of prisoners. It does so, on the one hand, by concocting legalistic definitions of torture that amount to the sanction of torture, and, on the other, by asserting that the president has sweeping powers to authorize the abuse of prisoners under his powers as commander-in-chief in war-time.

An August 2002 Justice Department memo laid down the ground rules for what constitutes torture, according to the twisted logic of Bush administration officials.

The memo was written at the request of Alberto Gonzales, then counsel to the president and now Bush's nominee to replace John Ashcroft as attorney general.

According to this memo, if an interrogator "knows that severe pain will result from his actions," but if causing such harm "is not his objective, he lacks the requisite specific intent even though the defendant did not act in good faith." The perpetrator is guilty of torture only "if he acts with the express purpose of inflicting severe pain or suffering on a person within his control."

In other words, torture is not torture if the specific intent of the interrogator is not to inflict pain, but rather some other objective, such as extracting information. Of course, no torturer would acknowledge having such intent, even as he carried out the most sadistic and violent crimes. Every torture regime in history, moreover, from the Spanish Inquisition to the Nazis, has justified the brutalization of its opponents as a necessary tool in the "war" against heresy, communism, terrorism, etc.

A statement by General Richard B. Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, reflects the real attitude of the Bush administration and the military top brass. To them, those incarcerated and brutalized at the hands of the US military are sub-human and their torturers should not be bound by international law.

Commenting Tuesday on the ICRC report, Myers said, "We certainly don't think it's torture." He continued, "Let's not forget the kind of people we have down there [in Guantanamo]. These are the people that don't know any moral values."



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