

US military covers up suicide protest at Guantánamo Bay

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The US military admitted last week that 23 prisoners at its Guantánamo jail had attempted a collective suicide by trying to hang or strangle themselves between August 18 and 26, 2003. Ten of the attempts occurred on a single day, August 22. The prisoners were locked in tiny 6-by-8 foot metal mesh cells next to each other and able to communicate.

Vague information about the desperate protest, which has been suppressed by the Pentagon for the past 18 months, came to light last year during a casual conversation between Guantánamo Bay personnel and two journalists visiting the military prison. Repeated media queries about the incidents finally saw the Pentagon's Southern Command release a statement on January 24.

Not surprisingly, the Pentagon tried to downplay the incidents, disdainfully describing them as "manipulative, self injurious gestures" and of little significance because they were "not successful".

Military spokesmen claimed that the detainees had sustained only "minor injuries" and officially categorised only two of the attempted suicides as "genuine". Although the names and nationalities of the prisoners involved were not revealed, the statement disclosed that seven of the men have since been released from Guantánamo.

Asked by the media why the military had not previously reported the protests, Southern Command Lieutenant Commander Chris Loundemon declared that, "a (press) release would not be made for every self-harm incident".

While Washington has officially acknowledged only 34 suicide attempts since it began incarcerating detainees in Guantánamo in January 2002, it was forced to admit last week that there had been 460 "self-harm incidents" over two years. They included 120 "hanging

gestures" using clothing or bedding. Notwithstanding the Pentagon doublespeak, these figures show that there had been an attempted suicide every second day.

The Southern Command statement claimed that the attempted suicides in mid-August 2003 were a bid to "disrupt camp operations" and "challenge a new group of security guards". It asserted that there had been no successful suicides because Guantánamo had a "vigilant, well-trained guard force, charged with the safe and humane custody of the detainees".

In fact, the attempted suicides were a desperate response to a new wave of human rights abuses unleashed against the prisoners, particularly following the appointment of Major General Geoffrey Miller as commander of Guantánamo in November 2002. Miller took charge after the White House authorised the use of torture and other interrogation methods in violation of the Geneva Conventions. He replaced General Rick Baccus, who was regarded by Washington as being too soft on the detainees.

On December 2, 2002, a month after Miller's installation, US Defense Secretary Rumsfeld approved recommendations from the Defense Department's chief lawyer, William J. Haynes II, that hooding, nakedness, dark rooms and "using detainees' individual phobias, such as fear of dogs, to induce stress", be implemented at Guantánamo.

While Rumsfeld rescinded this directive on January 15, 2003, after objections from some military lawyers, Miller had already unleashed a regime of terror at the prison.

Between January and March 2003, 14 prisoners tried to kill themselves, including one who sustained serious brain damage. In other words, 40 percent of the 34 officially acknowledged suicide attempts since the prison opened occurred within a few months of

Miller's appointment.

In May 2003, Miller wrote a "72-point matrix for stress and duress" and three months later called for the construction of an execution chamber at Guantánamo. The intense pressure brought to bear on prisoners was clearly the major factor in the large number of suicide attempts in August.

Guantánamo Bay commanders apparently responded to the attempted suicides with extensive use of tranquilisers and other techniques to suppress the increasingly distressed inmates.

Last year the Red Cross drew attention to a "worrisome deterioration" in prisoners' mental health, which was confirmed by British prisoners released from Guantánamo. The British detainees reported numerous cases of serious psychological disorders. They said that at least 50 prisoners, or approximately 10 percent of inmates, were so disturbed that they were "no longer capable of rational thought or behaviour" and acted like small children.

Major David Auch, an Army Reserve physician who served at Guantánamo and later became head of the medical unit at Baghdad's Abu Ghraib prison, has admitted that one detainee would constantly bang his head against the door and walls of his cell. "They had him in a helmet to protect his head because he kept pounding it on the wall," he told the media. "Sometimes they flexicuffed him because he tried to scratch his face, tried to grab anything he could to mutilate himself."

Five days after Southern Command finally admitted the Guantánamo suicide protest, more information came to light about the illegal and depraved techniques employed at the prison.

On January 28, Associated Press (AP) published a report based on nine pages from a draft copy of *Inside the Wire*, a forthcoming book by Erik R. Saar, a 29-year-old former Army sergeant and Arabic translator stationed at Guantánamo between December 2002 and June 2003.

While Saar did not give the book to AP, he said details in the pages leaked to the news agency were correct. He decided to write *Inside the Wire*, which will be released later this year, because he was deeply disturbed by the sexual and religious persecution of detainees.

According to the AP story, some female

interrogators—military and civilian—wore bra and thong underwear to sexually arouse, humiliate and then break some of the more devout Muslim prisoners. Some of the detainees were smeared with fake menstrual blood during interrogations. An extract from the leaked pages read: "[T]he concept was to make the detainee feel that after talking to her [the interrogator] he was unclean and was unable to go before his God in prayer and gain strength."

The AP report and the revelations about the August 2003 mass suicide protest add to the mountain of evidence demonstrating that the detention and treatment of prisoners in Guantánamo is a war crime that flows inherently and inevitably from the brutal US-led occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan.



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