

State Department rights survey denounces as “torture” methods used by US

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The US State Department on February 28 issued its annual report on international human rights practices for 2004. In presenting a list of atrocities committed by governments around the world—excluding, of course, the United States—the document described as torture the very practices that have been approved by the Bush administration and employed in Iraq, Afghanistan, Guantanamo and other sites where the US is holding alleged terrorists.

Many of the methods condemned in other countries as “torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment” were approved by the highest levels of the American government, including Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld.

In December 2002, Rumsfeld approved a list of interrogation techniques to be used at Guantanamo Bay that included 20-hour interrogations, hooding, “removal of clothing,” “using detainees’ individual phobias (such as fear of dogs) to induce stress,” and “use of mild, non-injurious physical contact.”

For example, among the “principal methods of torture” employed by the Egyptian police, and denounced by the State Department, were “stripping and blindfolding victims” and “dousing victims with cold water.”

The blanket approval of interrogation methods by Rumsfeld in December 2002 was rescinded in January 2003, though the defense secretary held out the possibility that these and other methods could be approved on an individual basis.

Most of the methods condemned in the State Department report would be legal for the American government to use, according to the memo signed by Assistant Attorney General Jay Bybee on August 1, 2002. That memo, written for former White House counsel and current Attorney General Alberto

Gonzales, stated that for physical pain to amount to torture, it had to be “equivalent in intensity to the pain accompanying serious physical injury, such as organ failure, impairment of bodily function, or even death.”

This definition would allow the methods that the State Department condemns in relation to Saudi Arabia, including: “beatings, whippings, and sleep deprivation... suspension from bars by handcuffs.” It would also allow most of the methods used by Pakistan: “burning with cigarettes; whipping the soles of the feet; prolonged isolation; electric shock; denial of food or sleep; hanging upside down; and forced spreading of the legs with bar fetters.”

The Bybee memo was requested by the CIA, which, according to various press reports, has used many of the tactics condemned in the State Department survey. The CIA has kept an unknown number of prisoners at secret locations around the world. The words used by the State Department against Egypt could equally well be applied to the CIA: the report denounces Egypt’s “incommunicado detention [of prisoners] for prolonged periods...frequently accompanied by allegations of torture.”

While the Bybee memo was formally withdrawn shortly before Gonzales’ confirmation hearings for the attorney general post, the administration has sought to prevent any specific prohibition on methods used by the CIA at its international detention facilities. One of the techniques widely believed to be used by the CIA is “water boarding,” the practice of repeatedly submerging a prisoner’s head into water to make him feel he is about to drown. The State Department report states that in 2004, Tunisia “reportedly tortured detainees to elicit confessions” by using the method of “submersion of the head in water,” among others.

Many of those countries singled out by the State

Department for violations of human rights and torture are also part of the CIA's "extraordinary rendition" program—its policy of deporting prisoners to foreign countries to be interrogated. One of the agency's most favored countries in this regard is Egypt. Another is Syria, where the US deported Canadian citizen Maher Arar, who was locked up and subjected to torture.

Ahmed Abu Ali, the American citizen charged last week with planning to assassinate Bush, claims he was tortured in Saudi Arabia at the behest of the US. The State Department report notes of that country: "There were credible reports of torture and abuse of prisoners by security forces, arbitrary arrests and incommunicado detentions."

Also significant is the State Department's treatment of human rights violations in Iraq. While the introduction presents Iraq, along with Afghanistan and Ukraine, as an example of successful American efforts "to expand freedom by helping to protect the political rights of their citizens and to advance the rule of law in their societies," the report notes widespread abuses by the US-supported Iraqi government.

It refers to a Human Rights Watch report, which it says indicates that "torture and ill treatment of detainees by [Iraqi] police [are] commonplace...The reported abuses included some instances of beatings with cables and hosepipes, electric shocks to their earlobes and genitals, food and water deprivation, and overcrowding in standing-room-only cells."

The report also states: "A number of complaints about Iraqi National Guard (ING) abuses surfaced during the year. For example, in November, the ING raided a house in southern Baghdad and arrested four alleged insurgents. The family was evicted and the ING burnt the house...There also were many reported instances of ING looting and burning houses in Fallujah in November"—i.e., when American forces attacked and destroyed the city.

The State Department further notes: "There was a widespread perception that police made false arrests to extort money. Some police officers did not present defendants to magistrates and held them in detention cells until their families paid bribes for their release...Reportedly, coerced confessions and interrogation continued to be the favored method of investigation by police. According to one government official, hundreds of cases were pending at year's end

alleging torture."

The report states, without comment, that "the police often continued to use the methods employed by the previous regime."

The State Department report does not mention that the actions carried out by the Iraqi police were perpetrated under the watchful eye of the American occupation. Nor does it mention the much larger crimes of American and British forces in the country, including the destruction of cities, arbitrary mass arrests, and the use of torture at Abu Ghraib prison and elsewhere.



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