Afghan president feigns outrage over latest US torture revelations

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24 May 2005

On the eve of Afghan President Hamid Karzai's current trip to the US, an article in last Friday's *New York Times* provided details of the systematic torture of detainees by American military interrogators in Afghanistan. The article confirmed that two deaths in custody in December 2002 were not the result of "natural causes", as the US military claimed at the time, but were the consequence of sustained beatings and physical abuse.

Concerned that the revelations would further fuel anti-US sentiment in Afghanistan, Karzai put on an indignant display of opposition at a press conference on Saturday. He said that he was "thoroughly shocked" by the story and called on Washington to take "very, very strong action" to deal with the culprits. Karzai declared he would press US President George Bush to return all Afghan prisoners to Kabul's control and insist on more control over US military operations in Afghanistan.

"No operations inside Afghanistan should take place without the consultation of the Afghan government," Karzai said. "They should not go to our people's homes any more without the knowledge of the Afghan government. If they want any person suspected in a house, they should let us know, and the Afghan government would arrange that."

Karzai's comments were directed at pacifying the widespread hostility, particularly among the Pashtun majority in the south and east of the country, generated by three years of US military operations and aimed at crushing continuing armed opposition to the US presence. Villages have been attacked or raided, homes ransacked and hundreds of Afghans arbitrarily detained, held without charge or trial and tortured.

Angry anti-US demonstrations erupted in Jalalabad, Kabul and other Afghan cities after a small article appeared in the *Newsweek* magazine on May 9 reporting the desecration of the Koran by US interrogators at Guantánamo Bay detention centre. Protesters burned US flags, chanted "Death to America" and "Death to Karzai", demanded the repatriation of Afghan prisoners in Guantánamo Bay, and condemned Karzai's decision to support the establishment of permanent US bases in the country. At least 15 people were killed by Afghan police brought in to quell the demonstrations.

While Karzai has dismissed the protests as the work of anti-government agitators, he is acutely aware that his regime is viewed with contempt by ordinary Afghans. In comments to Fox News, the president insisted that Afghanistan's independence and self-reliance was growing. "No Afghan is a puppet, you know," he feebly declared. But that is exactly what Karzai is: a figure selected and installed by Washington and completely dependent on the US, financially, politically and militarily.

For all the talk of the US and Afghanistan being "partners", Karzai's subservience to Washington was on display as soon as he set foot in the US. Gone were Karzai's protestations and feigned outrage over torture. Bush dismissed any suggestion that US would release Afghan prisoners or grant Kabul a greater role in supervising US military operations. However, at their joint press conference yesterday, there was not a hint of criticism. Karzai simply described the deaths of the two detainees as "sad" and blamed individual soldiers. He duly signed a "strategic partnership" paving the way for a long-term US presence in Afghanistan and agreed that US forces will continue to have "freedom of action".

Just what that signifies is underscored by the details contained in the *New York Times* article, which was based on a confidential 2,000-page file compiled by US army investigators and obtained by the newspaper. While the army report was limited to a review of the two deaths and obviously concerned to minimise the political fallout, it nevertheless confirmed that the US military operated a regime of systematic physical and psychological torture at its detention facility at the Bagram air base north of Kabul.

Even the *New York Times* was compelled to cautiously conclude: "[T]he Bagram file includes ample testimony that harsh treatment by some interrogators was routine and that guards could strike shackled detainees with virtual impunity. Prisoners considered important or troublesome were handcuffed and chained to ceilings and doors of their cells, sometimes for long periods, an action Army prosecutors recently classified as criminal assault."

The deaths of Mullah Habibullah, 30, and Dilawar, a 22-year-old farmer and part-time taxi driver, were a direct result of their treatment at the hands of US interrogators.

Habibullah was captured on November 28, 2002 by an Afghan warlord and delivered two days later to what was known as the Bagram Collection Point by CIA operatives who claimed he was a brother of a former Taliban commander.

Over the next three days, Habibullah was subjected to verbal abuse, beatings and physical torture designed to end his alleged arrogance, insubordination and lack of cooperation. The *New York Times* provides a harrowing day-by-day account of the treatment. He was isolated, hooded and shackled by his wrists to the wire ceiling of his cell. By the second day he was coughing and complaining of chest pains. He limped into the interrogation room because of repeated blows to his legs. Far from providing medical assistance, the interrogators laughed and made fun of him.

The beatings continued on December 3. Habibullah returned to an isolation cell where he was shackled to the ceiling by two sets of handcuffs and a chain around his waist. Guards found him slumped

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forward, his body held up by the chains, and unresponsive. One guard claimed that Habibullah spat at him when the hood was removed the prisoner's head—the pretext for another series of blows. Twenty minutes later, Habibullah was found dead in his cell.

As the *Times* explained: "Mr Habibullah's autopsy, completed on December 8, showed bruises or abrasions on his chest, arms and head. There were deep contusions on his calves, knees and thighs. His left calf was marked by what appeared to have been the sole of a boot. His death was attributed to a blood clot, probably caused by the severe injuries to his legs, which travelled to his heart and blocked the blood flow to his lungs."

On December 5, Dilawar was delivered to Bagram. He was detained along with three passengers in his taxi on allegations of involvement in an attack on a US military base. Although he was small and described by his brother as "a shy man", he was singled out as being "non-compliant" because he cried out when kicked and beaten. Describing a session on December 8, Mr Ahmadzai, an interpreter, explained: "About the first 10 minutes, I think, they were actually questioning him, after that it was pushing, shoving, kicking and shouting at him. There was no interrogation going on."

During the final session on December 10, Dilawar was clearly distraught and disoriented. He was exhausted and unable to adopt the "stress positions" ordered by his torturers. Yet he was subject to more violent physical abuse and humiliating threats to ship him to a US prison where he would be "treated like a woman, by the other men". He was taken back to his cell and once again strung up to the ceiling. The following morning he was dead.

The autopsy found some coronary artery disease but concluded, as in the case of Habibullah, that his Dilawar's heart failed due to "blunt force injuries to the lower extremities". One of the coroners, Lieutenant Colonel Elizabeth Rouse, later testified that Diliwar's legs "had basically been pulpified". "I have seen similar injuries in an individual run over by a bus," she said.

One of the US soldiers who witnessed the final interrogation told the *Times* that "most of us were convinced the detainee was innocent". Dilawar's three passengers were sent to Guantánamo Bay but released in March 2004 with letters declaring that they posed "no threat" to US forces. The militia commander who originally detained the four was himself arrested in February on suspicion of carrying out the attack on the US base and turning over the "suspects" to deflect blame.

The attempt by the Bush administration, aided by Karzai, to dismiss the deaths as the crimes of a few individuals is the just the latest in a series of blatant cover-ups designed to obscure the responsibility of the White House and the Pentagon for torture in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The US military responded to the deaths by claiming that two men had been afforded all possible medical care and died from "natural causes". The US military commander in Afghanistan, Lieutenant General Daniel McNeill, continued to insist as late as February 7, 2003 that he had "no indication" that either man had been injured in custody. This was nearly two months after the autopsies ruled the deaths to be "homicides".

All the indications were that the deaths were going to be swept under the carpet. Military investigators recommended that the cases be closed without the filing of any criminal charges. They along with military lawyers at Bagram claimed that it was not possible to determine who precisely was responsible for the injuries sustained by the prisoners. It was only after the results of the autopsies were made public in March 2003 that the Army Criminal Investigation Command changed tack and continued the probe.

Even then the drawn out inquiry has had minimal results. Last October, Criminal Investigation Command concluded there was the basis for charging 27 officers and soldiers with offences ranging from dereliction of duty to involuntary manslaughter over the death of Dilawar. Fifteen were also cited over Habibullah's death. But to date only, seven have been charged—four of them less than a fortnight ago—and none has been found guilty.

As in the case of US torture of inmates at the Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison, the military is attempting to blame a few scapegoats. All of those charges have protested their innocence, claiming that they were using accepted interrogation methods. John Galligan, a lawyer for one of the soldiers charged, told the *Times*: "At the time, my client was acting consistently with the standard operating procedure that was in place at the Bagram facility."

In 2003, some of the Bagram interrogators, including their operations officer Captain Carolyn Wood, were transferred to Iraq and took charge of detainees at the Abu Ghraib jail. Clearly, in conditions of an expanding anti-US armed resistance, the Pentagon was keen to use their expertise to extract information from Iraqi detainees. Not surprisingly an inquiry last year found the techniques employed in the two facilities were "remarkably similar".

Like the army itself, the *New York Times* has played down the latest evidence of torture in Afghanistan as the result of the poor training and inexperience of young soldiers. "The responsibility of senior officers at Bagram for carrying out such methods is not clear in the Army's criminal report," it disingenuously declared. The most elementary points were not probed. Why did top military officers lie about the deaths? Why have the results of the investigations not been made public? Why has the investigation been limited to the two deaths not extended to other cases of torture and deaths in custody?

The obvious answer is that the Bush administration and the US military are directly responsible for the regime of torture in Iraq and Afghanistan. As for Karzai, his ridiculous posturing over the latest revelations simply exposes him for what he is: a US stooge. More than two years after autopsy findings of homicide were made public, he has, in rapid succession, declared himself "shocked", demanded "very, very strong action" and then shelved his objections—allowing the US military "freedom of action" in its repressive operations in Afghanistan.

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