

Amnesty International report denounces US abuses of human rights

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Amnesty International has called on the Bush administration to close its prison camp at the US Navy base in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, calling it “the gulag of our time.”

The human rights group’s Secretary General Irene Khan called for the closure of the infamous institution, where about 540 men have been detained for as long as three years, most without trial, purely on suspicion of having links to the Taliban regime or Al Qaeda. The “gulag” refers to the camps run by the Stalinist regime in the former USSR, where it kept thousands of political prisoners.

Khan was speaking at a press conference to launch Amnesty’s 308-page annual report for 2004, which accuses the United States and its main ally Britain of betraying the cause of human rights in pursuit of the so-called “war on terror.”

“Not a single case from some 500 men has reached the courts,” Khan said.

She accused Washington and London of both perpetrating and condoning acts of torture. “A new agenda is in the making, with the language of freedom and justice being used to pursue policies of fear and insecurity. This includes cynical attempts to redefine and sanitise torture,” said Ms. Khan.

US troops have committed appalling torture and sexually abused detainees, Kahn said, and evidence has since come to light “that the US administration had sanctioned interrogation techniques that violated the UN Convention against Torture.” “The US administration attempted to dilute the absolute ban on torture through new policies and quasi-management speak such as ‘environmental manipulation,’ ‘stress positions’ and ‘sensory manipulation’...

“When the most powerful country in the world thumbs its nose at the rule of law and human rights, it grants a license to others to commit abuse with impunity,” she warned.

For its part, the British government led by Prime Minister Tony Blair has claimed that the Human Rights Act did not apply to British soldiers operating in Iraq. Also, by seeking diplomatic assurances from Arab countries such as Algeria that those it was seeking to deport would not be tortured, it was tacitly admitting that torture was entrenched in those countries and was therefore, in effect, condoning the practice.

Amnesty’s report accuses governments around the world of abandoning human rights protections. In her foreword, Khan

writes of an “assault on fundamental values that is shaking the human rights world,” of which the most damaging expression is “the efforts by the US administration to weaken the absolute ban on torture.”

Neither the Bush administration nor the US Congress has called for a full and independent investigation of the abuses of prisoners at Abu Ghraib, or into the evidence suggesting that such practices are being applied to other prisoners held by America in Afghanistan, Guantánamo and elsewhere. “Instead, the US government has gone to great lengths to restrict the application of the Geneva Conventions and to ‘re-define’ torture,” Khan said.

“It has sought to justify the use of coercive interrogation techniques, the practice of holding ‘ghost detainees’ (people in unacknowledged incommunicado detention) and the ‘rendering,’ or handing over, of prisoners to third countries known to practise torture. The detention facility at Guantánamo Bay has become the gulag of our times,” she said, “entrenching the practice of arbitrary and indefinite detention in violation of international law. Trials by military commissions have made a mockery of justice and due process.”

Khan added that the UN Commission on Human Rights “has become a forum for horse-trading on human rights. Last year, the commission dropped Iraq from scrutiny, could not agree on action on Chechnya, Nepal or Zimbabwe, and was silent on Guantánamo Bay.”

In the section of the annual report dealing with the Middle East and North Africa the report explains, “Civilians bore the brunt of the casualties as the war in Iraq intensified and the death toll rose. Tens of thousands of men, women and children were reported to have been killed or injured since the armed conflict began in March 2003. Both the US-led occupying forces and armed groups operating in Iraq—often with the declared objective of resisting foreign occupation—continued to violate international human rights and humanitarian laws with impunity. “Throughout the year there were reports that scores of civilians had been killed unlawfully by the US-led forces during bombardments of Fallujah, Najaf and Samarra, and in various operations in Baghdad.”

Amnesty also states that hundreds of civilians have been killed in “indiscriminate or direct attacks by armed groups”

opposing the US occupation.

Some 700 Palestinians were killed by Israel in the Occupied Territories, including about 150 children: “Most were killed unlawfully, in reckless shootings, shellings or air strikes on refugee camps and other densely populated areas throughout the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Israeli forces continued to carry out extrajudicial executions of members and leaders of Hamas and other Palestinian groups, in which bystanders were frequently killed or injured.

“The destruction of Palestinian homes, land and property in the West Bank and Gaza Strip was stepped up in the biggest wave of house demolitions in the Gaza Strip since the beginning of the Intifada (uprising) that has left close to 4,000 Palestinians homeless. In the West Bank, Israel continued to build a 600-kilometre fence/wall encircling and cutting off Palestinian towns and villages, despite the ruling by the International Court of Justice.

“Some 109 Israelis, most of them civilians and including eight children, were killed by Palestinian armed groups in suicide bombings, shootings and mortar attacks inside Israel and in the Occupied Territories.”

Elsewhere in the Middle East, “human rights violations continued to be justified by the global ‘war on terror’ as security forces across the region responded to attacks by armed groups they accused of links with Al Qaeda.”

In the section on the Americas, Amnesty turns once more to the way that the US-led “war on terror” has undermined human rights. The report explains:

“President Bush’s refusal to apply the Geneva Conventions to those captured during the international armed conflict in Afghanistan and transferred to the US naval base at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, was challenged by a judicial decision in November. The ruling resulted in the suspension of trials by military commission in Guantánamo, and the government immediately lodged an appeal. The US administration’s treatment of detainees in the ‘war on terror’ continued to display a marked ambivalence to the opinion of expert bodies such as the International Committee of the Red Cross and even of its own highest judicial body. Six months after the Supreme Court ruled that the federal courts had jurisdiction over the Guantánamo detainees, none had appeared in court. Detainees reportedly considered of high intelligence value remained in secret detention in undisclosed locations. In some cases their situation amounted to ‘disappearance.’”

In addition, “The ‘war on terror’ and the ‘war on drugs’ increasingly merged, and dominated US relations with Latin America and the Caribbean. Following the US elections in November, the Bush administration encouraged governments in the region to give a greater role to the military in public order and internal security operations. The blurring of military and police roles resulted in governments such as those in Brazil, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico and Paraguay deploying military forces to deal with crime and social unrest.”

The US has also continued to pressure governments throughout the region to sign unlawful immunity agreements shielding US personnel from surrender to the International Criminal Court: “Of 12 countries that had refused to sign, 10 had some military aid suspended as a result. In November the US Congress threatened to cut off development aid to countries that refused to sign.”

In a more pointed statement, William Schulz, the executive director of Amnesty International’s US branch, issued a direct warning to top US officials.

“The apparent high-level architects of torture should think twice before planning their next vacation to places like Acapulco or the French Riviera,” he said, “because they may find themselves under arrest as Augusto Pinochet famously did in London in 1998.”

Schulz added, referring to the lack of a statute of limitations on crimes against humanity, “Let’s keep in mind that these issues can be pursued years from now, not just today.”

In the section dealing with Europe and Central Asia, the report notes that governments “continued to roll back rights under the auspices of the ‘war on terror.’ Although the highest court in the UK ruled in a landmark decision that indefinite detention without charge or trial of foreign ‘suspected international terrorists’ was unlawful, 11 men still remained in detention—and one under effective house arrest—at the end of 2004. Earlier the Court of Appeal of England and Wales had ruled that ‘evidence’ obtained by torture of a third party would be inadmissible in court proceedings only if UK agents had been directly involved in, or connived at, the torture. Throughout the year the UK also sought to circumvent its obligations under domestic and international human rights law by asserting that international human rights law did not bind its armed forces in Iraq and Afghanistan.”

Sections of the report also deal with the situation in Africa and Asia and the Pacific. The report can be read in full at <http://web.amnesty.org/report2005/index-eng>.



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