

Amnesty International refuses to retract torture charges against US

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In the face of denunciations and slanders from top Bush administration officials, Amnesty International has refused to back down on charges of US-sanctioned torture in its annual report for 2004, issued May 25.

At a press conference to release the report, Irene Khan, the secretary general of the London-based human rights organization, denounced the Bush administration for authorizing “interrogation techniques that violated the UN Convention Against Torture.”

Khan singled out the US prison camp at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, for condemnation and noted that it is but one in a network of prison camps, some of them at secret locations, set up by the US under the cover of its “war on terrorism.”

Calling Guantánamo the “gulag of our time,” she denounced the US government for opposing any independent investigation and demanded that the facility be closed down.

William Schulz, the executive director of Amnesty International USA, named US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and Attorney General Alberto Gonzales as “apparent high-level architects of torture” and warned that they and other top administration officials should think twice about vacationing outside the US, lest they “find themselves under arrest as Augusto Pinochet famously did in London in 1998.”

Amnesty’s charges—massively substantiated in the infamous photos from Abu Ghraib prison, ongoing probes into the abuse and murder of alleged terrorists held in American-run prisons in Iraq and Afghanistan, documented reports of detainees “rendered” to countries notorious for practicing torture, and documents from the Pentagon and the White House legal counsel’s office sanctioning brutal interrogation methods defined by international law as torture—evoked a hysterical response from the Bush administration and most of the US media.

They seized on the “gulag” analogy in an effort to discredit Amnesty for making supposedly irresponsible and outlandish accusations. At a press conference last week, Bush called Amnesty’s allegations “absurd” and attributed them to forces that “hate” the United States. Vice President Dick Cheney said he was “offended” that Amnesty should suggest that “somehow the United States is a violator of human rights (!)” Rumsfeld called Amnesty’s statements “reprehensible.”

In the face of this broadside, Amnesty officials have remained firm. Last Friday, Kate Gilmore, the group’s executive deputy secretary general, brushed aside Washington’s attacks and said the term “gulag” to describe Guantánamo had been chosen deliberately. The *New York Times* on Saturday reported a telephone interview conducted the previous day with Gilmore, who said the Bush administration’s response was “typical of a government on the defensive,” and, according to the *Times*, “drew parallels to the reactions of the former Soviet Union, Libya and Iran under Ayatollah Khomeini, when those governments were accused of human rights abuses.”

In an extraordinary interview broadcast June 5 on “Fox News Sunday,” Amnesty USA head Schulz fended off a barrage of hostile questions from the host, Chris Wallace, and reiterated his organization’s charges against

the US government. Even by the standards of Rupert Murdoch’s Fox News channel, which routinely seeks to bully and intimidate guests who are critical of the Bush administration, Wallace’s demeanor and tactics were provocative. The interviewer barely made a pretense of impartiality in attempting to carry out his assignment of discrediting the Amnesty official.

In the end, Schulz succeeded in making the case that the United States is guilty of gross violations of international laws on torture, and of blocking any independent investigation into its crimes. He effectively made use of Wallace’s own acknowledgement of documented interrogation methods at Guantánamo and other US-run prisons to back his accusations.

Fox News’s Wallace set the tone for the interview by prefacing a clip of Irene Khan calling Guantánamo the “gulag of our times” with the jibe: “Let’s start with the rhetoric.”

Then came the following exchange:

Wallace: “Mr. Schulz, the Soviet gulag was a system of slave labor camps that went on for more than 30 years. More than 1.6 million deaths were documented. Whatever has happened at Guantánamo, do you stand by the comparison to the Soviet gulag?”

Schulz: “Well, Chris, clearly this is not an exact or literal analogy. And the secretary general has acknowledged that...in size and duration, there are not similarities between US detention facilities and the gulag. People are not being starved in those facilities. They are not being subjected to forced labor.

“But there are some similarities. The United States is maintaining an archipelago of prisons around the world, many of them secret prisons into which people are being literally disappeared—held in indefinite incommunicado detention without access to lawyers or a judicial system or to their families. And in some case, at least, we know they are being mistreated, abused, tortured and even killed. And those are similar at least in character if not in size to what happened in the gulag and in many other prison systems in world history.”

Wallace responded with a journalistic trick, based on the White House’s unilateral declaration of a war on terror—never ratified by Congress—of indefinite duration and embracing the entire globe.

Wallace: “...in the case of Guantánamo and the other US detention facilities, they’re taking people off the battlefield in the middle of the war on terror. In the case of the Soviet gulag, they were taking millions of their own people whose only crime was that they wanted to practice political dissent or their own religion. Do you see a moral equivalency here?”

Schulz: “Well, of course—here’s part of the problem, Chris—because those who have been detained, not just at Guantánamo Bay but at other detention facilities around the world, have not been permitted to state the cases in their own defense; have not been permitted access to lawyers. We don’t know for sure whether the assumption that you’ve just made is accurate.

“We do know that at least some of the 200-some prisoners who have

been released from Guantánamo Bay have made pretty persuasive cases that they were imprisoned because they were enemies of the Northern Alliance, for example, in Afghanistan, or that they happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. So the question is: How did they get there in the first place? And ought they not have an opportunity to at least make their case for their potential freedom?”

At this point, Wallace decided to change the subject. He cited Schulz’s reference to Rumsfeld and Gonzales as “torture architects” and the Amnesty official’s allusion to the imprisonment of Pinochet, and asked: “Do you stand by the comparison of Donald Rumsfeld and Alberto Gonzales to a brutal dictator?”

Schulz responded by pointing out that any party to the Geneva Conventions or the Convention Against Torture is “obligated under international law to investigate those who are alleged to be involved with the formulation of a policy of torture or with its carrying out.”

He continued: “All we are saying is that the United States should be the one that should investigate those who are alleged at least to be architects of torture, not just the foot soldiers who may have inflicted the torture directly, but those who authorized it or encouraged it or provided rationales for it or, in the case of Rumsfeld, provided the exact rules, 27 of them in fact, for interrogation, some of which do constitute torture or cruel, inhumane treatment.”

This was succeeded by the following exchange:

Wallace: “Now, Secretary Rumsfeld did, we believe, approve putting prisoners in stress positions for prolonged periods of time, stripping them naked and even using dogs to frighten them. Mr. Schulz, do you have any evidence whatsoever that he ever approved beating of prisoners, ever approved starving of prisoners, the kind of things we normally [sic!] think of as torture?”

Schulz: “It would be fascinating to find out. I have no idea...”

Wallace: “Well, wait a minute. When you say fascinating to find out, you mean you don’t...”

Schulz: “But I do know that what you’ve just described, the use of dogs, stress positions, that constitutes a violation of the Convention Against Torture. That in and of itself is a clear violation.”

Wallace tried again to use the ploy of substituting his (and the US government’s) arbitrary and narrow definition of torture to confuse and ensnare his guest—with similar results.

Wallace: “If I may repeat, sir, do you have any evidence that he ever approved beating any prisoners or starving any prisoners, the kinds of things we think of as torture?”

Schulz: “Amnesty International has never accused him of approving starving of prisoners.... I said that Secretary Rumsfeld authorized—and you just listed some of them—he authorized behaviors on the part of interrogators that we believe are in violation of the Convention Against Torture. In fact, his own military lawyers required him to rescind four of the 27 interrogatory rules that he provided.”

At this point, Wallace tried a new tack. He cited the Pentagon’s own internal investigations to claim that only 10 cases of detainee abuse have been confirmed at Guantánamo.

Schulz replied: “You just said according to the Pentagon. And the Pentagon and the US government have systematically precluded independent human rights groups from getting that answered.

“Now, what we do know is that FBI agents themselves raised concerns about people being held in stress positions for up to 24 hours. What we do know is that a Kentucky National Guardsman testified to prisoners having their heads slammed against the wall. What we do know is that the International Red Cross protested prolonged sleep deprivation there.

“Now, we don’t know the full extent of the mistreatment there. We know that in other US detention facilities, there has been profound mistreatment, including 27 homicides ruled by medical examiners to be inflicted homicides.”

When Wallace retorted, “I asked you whether the ICRC [International Committee of the Red Cross] has been allowed access to every place from Abu Ghraib to Guantánamo Bay, and the answer is yes, correct?” Schulz responded:

“Oh, Chris, I have no idea whether the Red Cross has been given access to the secret detention facilities that the US is maintaining. Have they been given access to the Syrian prisoners and the prisons where the United States is rendering prisoners? I have absolutely no idea, and I suggest that you don’t either. I think we don’t know.

“But what we do know is that in Guantánamo Bay, the Red Cross broke its long tradition of silence and denounced the United States for keeping prisoners incommunicado, indefinite detention.”

Exasperated, Wallace switched tracks again, citing Amnesty’s charge of “atrocious human rights violations” and demanding, “Where do you fit into that equation the liberation of 50 million people from oppressive regimes?”

Schulz replied: “These are entirely different questions.... Amnesty tries to hold one plumb-line universal standard to every government: to Chile, to Cuba, to North Korea, to China—every government.

“And the United States applauds Amnesty when we criticize Cuba and North Korea and China. Indeed, that’s Secretary Rumsfeld, who just called us reprehensible. That is the same person who quoted Amnesty regularly in the run-up to the Iraq war when we reported for 20 years on Saddam Hussein’s violations—years during which Rumsfeld himself was courting Hussein for the US government.”

All else having failed, Wallace resorted to the standby tactic of US talk show hosts in general, and Fox News in particular: the smear. He noted that Schulz had contributed financially to the campaigns of Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry and other Democrats, implying that his charges were motivated by partisan politics.

This too fell flat, as Schulz pointed out that the research conducted by Amnesty and the organization’s policies are set by its international office in London, not by its US branch. He then made a telling point:

“And that’s why I pointed out that the comment about the gulag came out of Amnesty in London. And whether the Americans like it or not, it does reflect how the more than 2 million Amnesty members in a hundred countries around the world and, indeed, the vast majority of those countries feel about the United States detention policy.”

When, in conclusion, Wallace asked: “Is it possible, sir, that by excessive rhetoric or by your political links, that you have hurt, not helped, your cause?” Schulz once again turned the tables on his inquisitor:

“Chris, I don’t think I’d be on this station, on this program today with you if Amnesty hadn’t said what it said and President Bush and his colleagues hadn’t responded as they did. If I had come to you two weeks ago and said, ‘Chris, I’d like to go on Fox with you just to talk about US detention policies at Guantánamo and elsewhere,’ I suspect you wouldn’t have given me an invitation.”

While Amnesty’s charges have sparked an outpouring of bile from the US government and its defenders, the organization’s frank assessment and the defamatory response from Washington have struck a chord among ordinary people in the US and around the world. The *Washington Post* reported Sunday, citing Schulz, that donations have quintupled and new memberships have doubled in the week since the report was issued.



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