

The CIA's global gulag

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The *Washington Post* revealed November 2 that the US Central Intelligence Agency operates a global network of secret prisons that holds individuals captured or kidnapped in America's so-called "war on terrorism." This illegal prison system, first set up following the September 11 attacks, has at various points included facilities in eight countries, among them Thailand, Afghanistan and several countries in Eastern Europe, as well as a center at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba.

Conditions in these jails, referred to as "black sites," are hellish. Prisoners are, according to the *Post*, kept in "dark, sometimes underground cells, they have no recognized rights, and no one outside the CIA is allowed to talk with or even see them, or to otherwise verify their well-being." The existence of these prisons has been known to only a handful of officials in the US, and generally to only the president and a few top intelligence officers in each host country.

It is illegal to hold anyone in covert prisons in the US, which is why the CIA operates these facilities overseas, far from courts, lawyers and any semblance of basic rights. None of those being held have been charged or convicted of any crime. They have been imprisoned entirely on the say-so of the CIA, notorious for its criminality and hostility to democratic practices.

The practice is also illegal in most of the countries concerned. The *Post*, in a craven act, agreed not to name the Eastern European nations that are permitting the CIA prisons to operate on their soil.

The Russian, Bulgarian, Slovak and Hungarian governments quickly denied that they hosted such facilities. The Czech interior minister, Frantisek Buban, told a news outlet that the Czech Republic had recently rejected a request to set up a detention center on its territory. "The negotiations took place around a month ago," he said. The Americans "made an effort to install something of the sort here, but they did not succeed."

The *Post* estimates that 100 terrorist suspects have been sent into the gulag and 30 "high-level" figures remain under CIA jurisdiction. Since US officials claim they have arrested more than 3,000 Al Qaeda militants since September 11, and only several hundred are still housed in Guantánamo, the estimates given in the *Post* article beg the question: Where are the others?

Unnamed US officials told the *Washington Post* that the 70 non-"high-level" prisoners have been handed over to Egyptian, Jordanian, Moroccan, Afghan and other intelligence services.

What goes on inside the CIA facilities, closer to medieval dungeons than modern prisons, can only be guessed at. Sadistic practices at US military facilities in Guantánamo, Afghanistan and Iraq provide clues. The CIA has organized its prison system specifically to avoid even the minimal oversight that exists in the military-run locations.

The *Post* notes: "Host countries have signed the UN Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, as has the United States. Yet CIA interrogators in the overseas sites are permitted to use the CIA's approved 'Enhanced

Interrogation Techniques,' some of which are prohibited by the UN convention and by US military law. They include tactics such as 'waterboarding,' in which a prisoner is made to believe he or she is drowning."

The *Post* reported on October 25 that Vice President Dick Cheney and CIA Director Porter Goss met with Senator John McCain earlier that month to urge the modification of a Senate provision banning the US government from carrying out "cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment" of prisoners in its custody. Cheney's proposed change, according to the *Post* article, "states that the measure barring inhumane treatment shall not apply to counterterrorism operations conducted abroad or to operations conducted by 'an element of the United States government' other than the Defense Department." In other words, Cheney and Goss are seeking legal sanction for torture by the CIA.

According to the *Baltimore Sun*, a new US army interrogation manual, which specifically prohibits sleep deprivation, stripping prisoners and the use of dogs, is being held up by Pentagon officials "who want to make sure the document does not conflict with practices at the US detention facility at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba."

The existence of the CIA gulag has outraged world public opinion. The European Commission has announced that it will investigate the reports of Eastern European cooperation. The governments of the European Union's 25 members will be formally questioned, EU spokesman Friso Abbing commented Thursday. Abbing stated that such prisons might violate the European Convention on Human Rights as well as the International Convention Against Torture.

Baroness Sarah Ludford, British member of the European Parliament, announced November 2 she would call on EU Commission Vice President Franco Frattini to launch an urgent inquiry into whether member states of the European Union might be involved in "the most barbaric practices of the misguided US war on terror."

In the wake of the *Washington Post* story, the International Committee of the Red Cross called for access to all foreign terrorism suspects held by the US. Manfred Nowak, the UN special rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, indicated that he would pursue access to all US detention facilities outside its territories.

A spokeswoman for Human Rights Watch in New York suggested that Poland and Romania were two Eastern European regimes hosting CIA prisons. She said Human Rights Watch based its conclusion on flight logs, such as a Boeing 737 that made trips to Eastern Europe from Afghanistan and countries in the Middle East. The Polish and Romanian governments issued denials.

As these comments indicate, the US, self-styled leader of the 'free world,' is increasingly viewed as a pariah. The secret international prison system, where torture and abuse are everyday occurrences, is a

creation worthy of the Hitler regime.

Confronted by the *Post* allegations, Bush administration officials displayed their usual combination of arrogance and mendacity. White House Press Secretary Scott McClellan told the press: "I am not going into discussing any specific intelligence activities. I would say that the president's most important responsibility is to protect the American people. It's a responsibility he takes very seriously."

The principal deputy to Director of National Intelligence John Negroponte, Air Force Gen. Michael Hayden, brushed aside questions about the revelations. "I'm not here to talk about that," he told a news conference in San Antonio.

US Attorney General Alberto Gonzalez, on record as an advocate of preemptive war and torture during his tenure as White House counsel, evaded questions about the CIA prisons during an interview on CNN. "I'm not going to confirm or deny on this show the existence of this program. We normally do not talk about intelligence activities."

The award for sheer sophistry and cynicism must go to National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley, recently implicated by the Italian press in the attempt to pass off the forged documents that alleged Iraq was seeking to purchase uranium "yellowcake" from Niger.

In response to a question at a White House briefing Wednesday, Hadley refused to confirm or deny the existence of the network of illegal prisons. He insisted that the "war on terror" would be conducted "in a way that is consistent with our values." The president has "been very clear that the United States will not torture. The United States will conduct its activities in compliance with law and international obligations."

The fact that the prisons "are secret, assuming there are such sites, does not mean" torture would be tolerated, he argued. "Some people say that the test of your principles [is] what you do when no one's looking. And the president has insisted that whether it is in the public or it is in the private, the same principles will apply and the same principles will be respected."

No one with a modicum of independent thought will fall for this. Hadley, speaking for a government that has made Abu Ghraib a synonym for sadistic torture, would have his audience believe that a hidden, illegal jail network, established to remove its victims from access to the most elementary democratic rights, does not imply the use of abuse and torture. As for its "international obligations," over the past four years the US government has turned breaching those into a matter of principle.

Should anyone have doubts, the everyday activities of the Bush administration make clear its attitude toward torture. After the resignation last week of the indicted Lewis Libby as his chief of staff, Cheney replaced Libby with David Addington, one of the group of extreme right-wing lawyers which was involved in the crafting of pseudo-legal arguments justifying torture in 2002.

On Tuesday, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld rejected a request by UN human rights investigators to meet with detainees at the Guantánamo Bay internment camp, where a hunger strike continues against the horrendous conditions.

Democrats in Congress responded in their usual mealy-mouthed fashion. Summing up the Democrats' response, Illinois Senator Dick Durbin said he was "troubled" by the *Washington Post* story. "It's another element of this administration's policy and the treatment of detainees and prisoners which I'm afraid will come back to haunt us at a future time."

Former President Jimmy Carter, more sensitive to international public opinion and the longer-term interests of American imperialism,

charged that the administration is changing "many values... dramatically and profoundly compared to all previous presidents who've ever served... I never even considered the fact that our country would be debating whether or not we could continue to torture prisoners around the world in secret prisons."

Despite its revelations about the criminality of the Bush administration, the *Post* continues to support the war in Iraq. On October 29, only days before running the piece on the torture prisons, the newspaper's editors, commenting on the Libby case, argued that "nothing in this indictment suggests a broad-based conspiracy that requires endless further investigation by Congress or others. Nor does this case prove (or refute) charges that President Bush misled the country about the grounds for war."

The following day, the *Post* editorialized that Bush "invaded Iraq in the hope of spreading democracy through the region, among other reasons." How the spread of democracy can be squared with the barbaric practices regularly exposed on their own news pages, the editors fail to explain.

Giving voice to the most predatory—and dominant—elements of the American ruling elite, *Investor's Business Daily* headlined its editorial on the subject of the secret prisons, "The Good Gulag." The editors wrote: "We expect our government to go all-out to prevent another 9-11. So the news we're holding dozens of al-Qaida terrorists in secret overseas compounds where they can be interrogated effectively is good indeed..."

"Within the CIA, there seems to be some serious hand-wringing over the idea of interrogators practicing their craft in places where they're not constrained by the US Constitution. But the first reaction to this news should be praise."

What's next? "The Good Concentration Camp"? "The Good Führer"? The editorial could hardly be clearer: The ruling elite in America intends to preserve its vast wealth and power by any means necessary.

The abominations revealed by the *Washington Post* are being carried out by the CIA and the Bush administration in the name of the American people. This is not only shameful and morally repugnant, it is a direct attack on the democratic rights of the American people themselves.

Repudiation of the Bush administration and its war in Iraq, as well as Bush's Democratic Party accomplices, will involve a profound political reorientation in the US and the emergence of a mass socialist movement directed against the foundations of the present rotten social order.



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