

Australian TV airs more photos of US torture at Abu Ghraib

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Pictures of Iraqi prisoners—naked, wounded, covered with blood, women’s underwear draped over their heads, bound in painful and degrading “stress positions”—were broadcast on Australian television Wednesday, further exposing the horrors inflicted at the US military’s prison camp at Abu Ghraib and similar facilities across the globe.

The photographs, which also included images of battered and bloodied corpses, were apparently taken about the same time as those that surfaced in April 2004, provoking a worldwide wave of revulsion and anger over the criminal methods cultivated by the Bush administration in its occupation of Iraq and its “global war on terrorism.”

Their existence has long been known. They were shown to a bipartisan group of Senate and House leaders in May of 2004, eliciting expressions of shock and dismay, together with statements of agreement with the Pentagon that the images should be suppressed.

Last September, US civil liberties groups won a court case against the Pentagon’s refusal to release the photographs and videotapes under the Freedom of Information Act, but the government has appealed the decision, raising a last-minute claim for an exemption that allows withholding law enforcement-related information in order to protect the safety of individuals.

Earlier, the government had advanced the cynical argument that making the images of the tortured Iraqis public would violate their rights under the Geneva Convention, the treaty governing treatment of prisoners of war that the Bush administration explicitly repudiated in authorizing torture in the first place.

Administration officials have freely acknowledged that the real reason for censoring the images is concern that they will fuel growing anger against US policy throughout the Middle East. Just as important a concern for the White House is that the further exposure of US atrocities in Iraq will only deepen the opposition of the American people to continuing the war.

The US military’s response to the airing of the material on Australia’s Special Broadcast Services (SBS) program “Dateline” was predictable. A spokesman for the US

occupation forces in Iraq declared the program “unnecessarily provocative” and “irresponsible.” A State Department official called the publication of the photographs “unfortunate.” The initial reaction of the US media appeared cautious, with relatively few of the images appearing on television news.

A spokesman for the Iraqi foreign minister voiced a meek criticism of the horrendous abuses depicted in the photographs, while echoing the US military’s criticism of the decision to broadcast the images.

“I feel bringing up these issues is only going to add head to an already fragile situation in Iraq and they’d don’t help anybody at all,” said the spokesman, Labeed Abbawi. “It will only lead to extra condemnation of Americans, British and later Iraqis in the situation of Jadriyah.”

This last reference was to the secret Iraqi Interior Ministry detention facility in the Baghdad neighborhood of Jadriyah, where the US-backed regime systematically tortured and murdered detainees.

“Dateline” executive producer Mike Carey said that the Australian network had obtained a file containing hundreds of images. Many of them, he added, were too appalling to air on television. The network declined to say how it had gotten the film, but it can be safely assumed that the same material is in the hands of the US media, which has exercised cowardly self-censorship.

In its presentation, SBS said that the images depicted “homicide, torture and sexual humiliation.” At least one of the corpses shown in a photograph aired on the program was that of a detainee who died under interrogation by the CIA. Another was that of a prisoner killed by gunfire.

A “Dateline” reporter said that this death stemmed from an incident in which US guards, attempting to suppress a prisoners’ protest over living conditions, ran out of rubber bullets and “were ordered to use lethal rounds.” The report added, “The detainees were fenced in a camp compound, with nowhere to run or hide.”

One photograph showed a man with a deep wound on his neck, surrounded by Americans in uniform, with one of

them pointing at the wound. Another was of a naked Iraqi man lying on a concrete floor next to a pool of blood.

Other photos showed a mentally ill man, his face covered in feces in one shot, and suspended upside down and naked from the top of a bunk bed in another. An SBS reporter said that the man served as a “plaything” for the US guards, who “experimented with ways to restrain him.”

Also seen were videotapes, including one of a visibly distraught Iraqi prisoner, slamming his head again and again into a bloodied cell door. Another was of a group of naked male prisoners forced to masturbate in front of a camera.

Much of the media commentary on these unspeakable images has centered on their creating a major “public relations” crisis for the Bush administration, appearing as they do in the midst of the continuing turmoil in the Muslim world over the publication of the Danish cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammed.

The reality, however, is that these photographs and videotapes are evidence of a grave crime against humanity. Murder, rape, the sodomizing of children, sexual torture, the use of dogs to tear the flesh of prisoners, all of this was carried out as a matter of state policy.

There is no question that the horrors depicted at Abu Ghraib continue, though not in front of the cameras. The US occupation authorities admit to currently holding nearly 15,000 Iraqis in four major detention centers, including nearly 5,000 in what are drastically overcrowded conditions at Abu Ghraib. Military officials acknowledge that the vast majority of these detainees have never been charged with and are not guilty of any offense. How many more prisoners are held in the CIA’s secret prisons around the world is not known.

Thus far, only a handful of the guards—junior-ranking reservists—have been tried for these depraved acts, while a handful of others faced demotions or fines. These included military police commander Brig. Gen. Janis Karpinski, demoted on an unrelated charge, who insists that she was made the scapegoat for a policy that was set by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld.

There is ample evidence of Rumsfeld’s guilt, including documents that he signed explicitly approving methods of interrogation that are defined under international law as torture. The torture employed at Abu Ghraib was not unique, nor was it—as the investigative whitewashes by the Pentagon claimed—the work of a handful of sadists. Rather, the guards were for the most part employing methods already tested by the military, private contractors and the CIA at the Guantánamo Bay detention camp in Cuba and then exported to the Iraqi prison.

Yet, in the two years since the first photographs were made public, not a single senior military officer, much less a

top civilian official in the Defense Department, has been charged or punished.

The failure to pursue any such cases is not merely a matter of the military brass protecting its own. Any such prosecution would inevitably pose the threat of moving up the chain of command, reaching not only the top commanders in Iraq, but those who decided that the US would not be bound by international law either in the conduct of war or the treatment of prisoners. This group includes not only Rumsfeld, but Attorney General Alberto Gonzales, Vice President Cheney and Bush himself.

Together, they elaborated a strategy based on the conception that the administration was neither bound by any law, international or domestic, nor obliged to respect any of the democratic rights of either US citizens or foreign nationals, all of whom could be reduced to the status of “enemy combatants,” subject to imprisonment without charges, torture and murder.

The grotesque photographs that have emerged from Abu Ghraib were prepared by White House decisions and secret memos that asserted the president’s right as “commander in chief” to commit war crimes with impunity.

Complicit in this policy is the Democratic Party, whose leadership maintained a telling silence in the face of the new revelations from Abu Ghraib. The Democrats have moved to take the Iraq war itself out of the political debate and have no intention whatsoever of making torture an issue. Like the Pentagon and the State Department, the Democrats view the exposure of the crimes carried out against Iraqi detainees as “unnecessary” and “unfortunate.”



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