

Abu Ghraib to close, abuse to continue

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The US military has announced plans to end use of the infamous Abu Ghraib prison facility in Iraq, and will turn it over to the Iraqi government within the next several months. The move will do nothing to end the systematic abuse of Iraqi prisoners, which has been most closely associated with, but by no means limited to, the torture carried out at Abu Ghraib.

General Peter Pace, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said on Thursday that the US is “in the process of building other facilities to move the detainees who are under US control out of Abu Ghraib,” and that it “should be several more months” before this process is completed. The Iraqi government said on Friday that it would transform the prison complex into a warehouse.

During the time of Saddam Hussein’s rule, Abu Ghraib, located in a predominantly Sunni Muslim neighborhood on the western outskirts of Baghdad, was notorious for torture carried out by the regime. After the American invasion, it changed hands, but served essentially the same purpose. It became a holding center for opponents of the American occupation and others swept up in arbitrary mass-arrests of Iraqi civilians.

In the fall of 2003, with opposition to American forces intensifying, more “aggressive” interrogation techniques were introduced into the prison, under the direction of top American military and political officials. It was at that time that the notorious photographs and videos of torture were taken, and since the initial photographs were released in 2004, Abu Ghraib has become, for masses of people around the world, a symbol of the brutality and ruthlessness of the American military. For this reason, it has also become a focal point of insurgent attacks.

Proposals to close down Abu Ghraib were initially floated by the Bush administration in the summer of 2004, shortly after the first torture photos emerged. These proposals were put aside temporarily after objections from the Iraqi stooge government, and after an American judge declared the prison facility a crime scene that must be preserved pending the trial of US soldiers. However, beginning in 2004, the military began plans for

constructing new facilities that could eventually take over for Abu Ghraib.

If anything, the closure of Abu Ghraib will make it easier for the US government to continue its policy of torture and illegal detention. The military plans to send all of the over 4,500 prisoners currently held at Abu Ghraib to new or existing detention facilities that are considered to be more “secure”—more easily hidden from the population of Iraq and the world, and from human rights organizations. Some of these facilities have already been cited for abuse similar to that at Abu Ghraib.

Among the facilities that have been proposed as alternative holding centers are: Camp Cropper near the Baghdad airport, currently holding a relatively small number of “high value detainees,” including Saddam Hussein; Camp Bucca in Shiite-dominated Southern Iraq, which with over 7,000 prisoners is the largest detention complex in the country; and Fort Suse, a new prison being built near Sulaymaniyah, a city in northern Iraq that is dominated by Kurdish organizations supportive of the American occupation.

A Baghdad resident quoted by the news agency Reuters noted, “The Americans will close Abu Ghraib and open three more prisons instead.”

The announcement comes less than a week after Amnesty International released a report entitled “Beyond Abu Ghraib: Detention and Torture in Iraq,” which describes the abusive conditions at prison complexes throughout the country. It noted that 4,000 of the over 14,000 prisoners that American forces have publicly reported have been held for over one year without being charged with any crime.

Both Camp Bucca and Camp Cropper have previously been associated with incidents of torture. In the spring of 2003, Andel Jabr Mousa, an Iraqi citizen, was brought to Camp Bucca, and three days later his body ended up in a morgue, covered with blood and bruises. There were reports of seven Iraqi deaths at the British-controlled portion of the prison between April and September 2003 alone. It was of the guards at Camp Bucca that a team

leader for the International Committee of the Red Cross said, “You people are no better than and no different than the Nazi concentration camp guards.” The guards had denied her access to the facility after a prison riot there.

A Red Cross report in 2004 noted that prisoners at Camp Bucca were “routinely treated by their guards with general contempt, with petty violence such as having orders screamed at them and being cursed, kicked, struck with rifle butts, roughed up or pushed around.”

Similar conditions prevail at Camp Cropper. An Amnesty International report from June 2003 called the conditions at Camp Cropper “cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, banned by international law.” According to the 2004 Red Cross report, one prisoner at Camp Cropper said that he had been “hooded and cuffed with flexi-cuffs, threatened to be tortured and killed, urinated on, kicked in the head, lower back and groin, force-fed a baseball ... and deprived of sleep for four consecutive days.”

The only real difference between these facilities and Abu Ghraib is that at Abu Ghraib there were photographs.

The decision to shut down Abu Ghraib parallels calls from sections of the political establishment to shut down the other notorious US prison complex at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. The *New York Times* reported on February 26 that the American military was quietly building up another detention center at Bagram air base in Afghanistan, where it has been directing prisoners instead of Cuba. Prisoners have even less rights at Bagram, and international organizations have even less access to them, than at Guantánamo.

The closing of Abu Ghraib has one essential purpose. The prison complex has become too closely associated with the American policy of torture. It must therefore be closed—so that this policy may continue.



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