

# Red Cross confirms Bush administration, CIA used torture in interrogations

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A confidential report by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) suggests that Bush administration officials may have committed war crimes in the operation of CIA “secret prisons” overseas, according to a lengthy analysis published on the web site of the *New Yorker* magazine Sunday.

The Red Cross report concluded that the methods used in the CIA interrogation of alleged 9/11 terrorist Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and other Al Qaeda prisoners were “tantamount to torture” and that Bush administration officials had likely committed “grave breaches” of the Geneva Conventions.

The article by Jane Mayer, entitled “The Black Sites,” is the product of a series of interviews with former CIA officers involved in operating the agency’s secret prisons overseas, agents who directly participated in torture sessions and apparently concluded that the methods they were employing were either immoral or counterproductive, or both.

The *New Yorker* has become one of the principal conduits for dissent within the military/intelligence apparatus directed against the policies of the Bush White House. Mayer’s colleague, Seymour Hersh, wrote the first extensive report on the abuse of prisoners at the US military prison at Abu Ghraib, near Baghdad, as well as a series of exposés about US preparations for a military strike against Iran.

Khalid Sheikh Mohammed was captured by Pakistani authorities in early 2003, just before the US invasion of Iraq, and held at secret CIA locations for nearly four years before his transfer to Guantánamo Bay. Last March, the Pentagon made public his “confession” to carrying out or planning no less than 31 separate terrorist atrocities, a statement widely hailed in official circles as proof that torture—or, in Washington-speak, “enhanced interrogation techniques”—was an effective and legitimate practice in the “war on terror.”

At the time, the *World Socialist Web Site* noted the dubious character of Mohammed’s self-incriminating statements, in which he claimed responsibility for an improbable number of spectacular plots, including purported

plans to destroy the Sears Tower, the Empire State Building and London’s Big Ben, and to assassinate former US President Jimmy Carter and Pope John Paul II. (See: “Washington exploits Guantánamo ‘confession’ to justify its crimes”)

No politically literate observer doubted that Mohammed had been severely tortured, and many said so, among them journalist Nat Hentoff (“Was Khalid Sheikh Mohammed tortured?”) and Professor Anthony D’Amato of Northwestern University School of Law (“True Confessions: The Amazing Tale of Khalid Shaikh Mohammed”), who compared the 26-page “confession” to the self-indictments by prisoners in the Stalinist purge trials of the 1930s. Mayer’s article confirms, in fact, that the CIA actually employed torture techniques first developed by the Soviet KGB and copied by US intelligence agencies during the Cold War.

The International Committee of the Red Cross was given access to Mohammed late last year, after his transfer to Guantánamo Bay. The policy of the ICRC is to discuss its findings only with the government holding prisoners in custody, not with the press, in order to insure its continued access to prisoners. But, according to Mayer, the ICRC report on the 15 detainees held in the CIA’s secret prisons was circulated through the very highest levels of the White House, State Department and National Security Council, and to some congressmen on the House and Senate committees that oversee the intelligence agencies.

Mayer cited “congressional and other Washington sources familiar with the report,” writing that “one of the sources said that the Red Cross described the agency’s detention and interrogation methods as tantamount to torture, and declared that American officials responsible for the abusive treatment could have committed serious crimes. The source said the report warned that these officials may have committed ‘grave breaches’ of the Geneva Conventions, and may have violated the US Torture Act.” Mayer adds, “The conclusions of the Red Cross, which is known for its credibility and caution, could have potentially devastating legal

ramifications.”

In other words, those US government officials who authorized and carried out the torture of CIA prisoners could face war crimes charges before either an American or international tribunal, as could those who subsequently became aware of what was taking place in the secret prisons and covered it up.

According to Mayer’s article, the CIA use of torture was not a “rogue” operation, but a massive bureaucratic enterprise involving systematic research and development to find the “best” methods for breaking down prisoners. CIA officials reviewed the techniques employed by the Phoenix Program during the Vietnam War as a model for the “war on terror.” The Phoenix Program involved the systematic assassination of an estimated 20,000 cadres, supporters and sympathizers of the National Liberation Front, as well as the widespread torture of prisoners.

The agency also sought interrogation advice from the secret police of Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, all of which practice barbaric methods of torture against political prisoners. And one former military interrogator described the techniques of exerting total control over a prisoner’s environment as “the KGB model,” developed during the purges against political dissidents in the former Soviet Union, and subsequently mimicked by the CIA.

Among the techniques used on Khalid Sheikh Mohammed were prolonged sensory deprivation, continuous shackling while naked, use of a dog leash and female interrogators, forcible slamming into the walls of his cell, suspension from the ceiling of the interrogation room by his arms, and the now-notorious practice of waterboarding, the simulated drowning technique employed as torture since medieval times (when it became known as the “Chinese water torture.”)

One interrogation expert told Mayer, referring to the victims of the torture sessions: “People were utterly dehumanized. People fell apart. It was the intentional and systematic infliction of great suffering masquerading as a legal process. It is just chilling.”

The torture was so severe and systematic that it had a profound psychological effect on some of the torturers themselves, according to Mayer, who interviewed one of those who interrogated Mohammed. This interrogator described a fellow torturer who now “has horrible nightmares ... It really haunts him. You are inflicting something really evil and horrible on somebody.”

CIA officials repeatedly voiced concerns that the orders they were receiving from the White House, and particularly from Vice President Dick Cheney, might leave them vulnerable to criminal prosecution, particularly since they were instructed to keep prisoners like Mohammed alive and

thereby preserve them as witnesses to their own abuse. As one official told Mayer, in a particularly chilling passage, “It would have been better if we had executed them.”

A former CIA official told Mayer that many agents had taken out liability insurance to help cover the anticipated legal bills when they face prosecution for prisoner abuse. There is a “high level of anxiety about political retribution,” he said, and “several guys expect to be thrown under the bus,” serving as fall guys for the decision-makers at the highest levels, including Bush, Cheney, former CIA Director George Tenet and Attorney General Alberto Gonzales, who, as White House counsel, supervised the process of giving a legal stamp of approval to torture.

Several leading congressional Democrats are well aware of the ICRC report, which was circulated to leaders of the Senate and House Intelligence committees, chaired by Senator Jay Rockefeller of West Virginia and Congressman Sylvestre Reyes of Texas. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid were likely “in the loop” as well.

This fact underscores the complicity of the congressional Democratic leadership, who only two days ago pushed through legislation that greatly expanded the domestic spying powers of an administration which they knew had been branded by the International Committee of the Red Cross as a serial perpetrator of war crimes.

Despite the sensational character of Mayer’s revelations, there has been relatively little comment on the subject in the American media. The *Washington Post*, in an article Sunday previewing the *New Yorker* account, confirmed the existence of the Red Cross report and its circulation at the highest levels in the US capital.

It cited “sources familiar with the document” as confirming that the detainees interviewed by the ICRC gave similar accounts of their torture even though they were held in isolation from each other and could not coordinate their stories. This reinforces the credibility of their testimony—as does the exporting of these methods from the CIA secret prisons and the Guantánamo Bay concentration camp to the US military prison in Abu Ghraib, Iraq, where digital photographs made public in 2004 caused worldwide revulsion at US torture methods.



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