

The New York Times and Washington's new prison in Afghanistan

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On May 17 the *New York Times* reported on plans for a new, US-run prison complex at Bagram air base north of the Afghan capital, Kabul. The prison complex would occupy 40 acres on the base, house up to 1,100 prisoners, and cost more than \$60 million to build. The complex will replace an existing prison, the Bagram Theater Internment Facility.

Military officials told the press they were concerned about the health effects on US troops stationed at the current Bagram facility, which is heavily contaminated with toxic heavy metals. They are unwilling to turn “dangerous” detainees over to the Afghan puppet government, however, and are planning on building a new prison, under direct US control.

The *Times* described the existing Bagram prison as overcrowded, with inadequate restroom and exercise facilities, and acknowledged that American guards had beaten several detainees to death there. Comparing conditions there to those at Guantánamo Bay, the US-run concentration camp in Cuba which has become notorious for its torture and arbitrary punishment of detainees, it reported: “Military personnel who know both Bagram and Guantánamo describe the Afghan site [...] as far more Spartan. Bagram prisoners have fewer privileges, less ability to contest their detention and no access to lawyers.”

Starting with these horrible facts, the *Times* then took on a grotesquely Orwellian task: presenting the construction of the new prison as an exercise in humanitarianism.

Citing US military officials who told the *Times* the new prison would be would be “more modern and humane,” it continued: “Classrooms will be built for vocational training and religious discussion, and there will be more space for recreation and family visits, officials said. [...] The structures will have more natural

light, and each will have its own recreation area.”

It quoted a senior Pentagon official for detention policy, Sandra L. Hodgkinson: “The driving factor behind this is to ensure that in all instances we are giving the highest standards of treatment and care.”

One rubs one’s eyes in disbelief. US treatment of prisoners in Afghanistan has been distinguished, in fact, by its murderous brutality, from the very beginning of the US-led occupation.

According to evidence presented by Irish filmmaker Jamie Doran and the German TV program *Panorama*, thousands of Taliban troops who had surrendered to US-backed warlord Abdurrahid Dostum in November 2001 were transported in suffocating containers, then shot and buried in mass graves in northern Afghanistan, under the supervision of US Special Forces. US airpower bombed Taliban prisoners-of-war who had revolted against the terms of their CIA interrogation at the Qala-i-Janghi fortress. Upon finding American John Walker Lindh wounded but alive in the ruins of the fortress, US forces left his wounds untreated in an effort to extract confessions from him.

In breach of the Geneva Conventions, the US government admits to holding 10 children prisoner at Bagram air base.

Bagram is notorious as a destination for CIA-run flights carrying prisoners to Afghanistan to be tortured. In 2003, US military officials at Bagram air base told the human rights group Amnesty International they used forced standing and sleep deprivation as interrogation techniques, and a 2005 internal US Army report found that prisoners were shackled to doors and ceilings for long periods of time, a procedure the Army classified as criminal assault.

Why does the *New York Times*, the authoritative voice of what passes for American liberalism, present

the opening of a prison in such an environment as a triumph of humanitarianism?

The nauseating superposition of humanitarian language over the machinery of torture and repression reflects an ultimately irresolvable contradiction of liberalism: its striving to reconcile the masses' democratic instincts with the strategic interests of the ruling class. This contradiction has become particularly acute as the crisis of the Washington's war policy in the Middle East intensifies, especially in the run-up to the US presidential elections this November.

For the US bourgeoisie, a particularly pressing electoral task is presenting the liberal Democratic Party—altogether falsely—as a viable alternative to the Bush administration. The contradiction between this task and the defense of the US bourgeoisie's dominant world position is, however, increasingly difficult to hide.

The US ruling elite has essential strategic interests in Afghanistan. Afghanistan and neighboring regions are a potential nexus of oil pipelines and trade routes connecting Iran and the broader Middle East to Central Asia, Russia, China, and the Indian subcontinent. For US capitalism, crucial questions of influence over commercial and geopolitical rivals are to be decided by maintaining a firm grip over the region—or, at least, by preventing any competitor from doing so.

This glowing account of a new US prison emerges amid definite signs of plans to shift US strategy, towards growing emphasis on the war in Afghanistan. The *Times* itself noted that US officials were foreseeing “waves of new prisoners from the escalating fight against Al Qaeda and the Taliban.” This comes on the heels of the May 3 announcement of the deployment of at least 7,000 more US troops to Afghanistan, bringing US troop strength there over 40,000. A UN report released last week also revealed that CIA death squads are now active in Afghanistan.

The Bush administration's strategy of focusing on Iraq and leaving Afghanistan to smaller US detachments augmented by forces provided by NATO allies has repeatedly been put in question. One of the more prominent voices to do so was the *New York Times*, which in August of 2007 wrote an editorial titled “The Good War, Still to be Won,” arguing for an escalation of the war in Afghanistan.

NATO officials are particularly concerned that the

new Pakistani government, hesitant to risk an all-out confrontation with pro-Taliban militants in its fractious border areas with Afghanistan, is not taking on anti-US fighters who attack NATO forces and then find refuge in Pakistan. For instance, on May 15 NATO spokesman James Appathurai told reporters in Brussels that “deals being struck between the Pakistani government and extremist groups in the tribal areas may be allowing them, the extremists, to have safe havens, rest, reconstitute and then move across the border.”

It is significant that these reports are emerging as it seems increasingly likely the Democratic Party will nominate as its 2008 presidential candidate Senator Barack Obama, who has been a long-time and vocal advocate of a harder line on Pakistan and Afghanistan.

During his keynote address at the 2004 Democratic Presidential Convention, Obama floated the idea of missile strikes against Pakistan. In January 2007, Obama proposed the Iraq War De-Escalation Act of 2007 in Congress, a bill which would have reversed the Iraq troop surge and redeployed US troops to Afghanistan and other locations. In his August 1, 2007 foreign policy speech, Obama proposed “getting out of Iraq and on to the right battlefield in Afghanistan and Pakistan.”

More recently, at a May 11 campaign meeting in Cape Girardeau, Missouri, Obama complained that “We don't have enough capacity right now to deal with” the war in Afghanistan.



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