

Red Cross: US tortured terror suspects

Tom Eley
17 March 2009

US military personnel and intelligence agents, acting on orders from the Bush administration, carried out brutal and systematic torture against 14 "high-value detainees" seized in the "war on terror," a recently obtained report by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) proves.

The confidential ICRC report is based on interviews with the 14 captives at the US naval base in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, after they were transferred there in 2006 from a worldwide CIA gulag of "black sites" and secret flights. The Red Cross agreed that the resulting report would be made available only to a handful of top government officials.

Journalist Mark Danner obtained and published extensive quotes from the report in a lengthy article in Sunday's *New York Review of Books* ("U.S. Torture: Voices from the Black Sites"). Danner has not revealed his source.

The ICRC report is unequivocal in its conclusions. The treatment of captives in CIA-operated prisons "constituted torture" and "cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment." The ICRC oversees the humanitarian elements of the laws of war stipulated by the Geneva Conventions; its use of the terms "torture," "cruel," "inhuman," and "degrading" carry significant legal weight.

The ICRC report illustrates, in horrifying detail, the criminal character of "the war on terror." Its interviews with 14 different detainees resulted in remarkably similar descriptions of the prisoners' experiences, including beatings, sleep deprivation, forced nudity and other forms of humiliation, prolonged exposure to painful positions, exposure to extreme temperatures, and "waterboarding," or drowning.

"The ICRC wishes to underscore," the report reads, "that the consistency of the detailed allegations provided separately by each of the fourteen adds particular weight to the information provided...." Because the inmates were kept in constant solitary confinement and were separated even after their arrival at Guantánamo, it is impossible they colluded to create such similar stories.

Nine of the 14 captives were seized in Pakistan. American military and intelligence personnel put the captives in diapers, blindfolded them completely by placing black goggles over their eyes and sacks over their heads, plugged their ears, shackled them at the hands and feet, and in this way—deprived of their senses and ability move—placed them in painful

positions on long flights to unknown destinations.

This is the manner in which captives would be moved repeatedly to CIA "black sites" in nations where they were tortured—Poland, Romania, Thailand, Morocco, and Afghanistan are named. There they were placed in tiny cells. Walid Bin Attash, a Yemeni, reports his was three-and-one-half by six-and-one-half feet in size.

Interrogations were typically accompanied by beatings and waterboarding. Attash told the ICRC that "every day for the first two weeks I was subjected to slaps to my face and punches to my body during interrogation.... A collar was looped around my neck and then used to slam me against the walls of the interrogation room.... Also on a daily basis...I was made to lie on a plastic sheet placed on the floor which would then be lifted at the edges. Cold water was then poured onto my body with buckets."

In pauses during interrogations, Khaled Shaik Mohammed, another prisoner, was taken into another room where "cold buckets of water were thrown onto me for about forty minutes."

These brutal interrogations were separated by near-constant torture in the day-to-day conditions the captives faced. Prisoners were forced to remain in painful positions for long periods of time. In most cases, their wrists were chained to the ceiling in small prison cells, and they were left naked, in cold temperatures, for extended periods.

Attash, for example, was chained, naked, to a ceiling for two weeks, during which time he was allowed to lie down two or three times. In another prison, he was chained "in a standing position with my arms above my head and fixed with handcuffs and a chain to a metal ring in the ceiling."

In another instance, Abu Zubaydah, a Saudi of Palestinian background, was forced to sit in a chair, shackled, for between two and three weeks. "During this time I developed blisters on the underside of my legs due to constant sitting. I was only allowed to get up from the chair to go [to] the toilet, which consisted of a bucket."

Several prisoners report that they were denied solid food, sometimes for weeks at a time. Instead, they were given a vitamin-infused beverage called Ensure. "During the first two weeks I did not receive any food," Attash told the ICRC, "I was only given Ensure and water to drink."

The prisoners were exposed to noise torture. "Very loud, shouting type music was constantly playing," said Zubaydah,

"It kept repeating about every fifteen minutes twenty-four hours a day. Sometimes the music stopped and was replaced by a loud hissing or crackling noise." The prisoners were often exposed to either constant bright, artificial light, or to complete darkness.

The prisoners were not allowed to sleep for days at a time. "I could not sleep at all for the first two to three weeks," Zubayadah explained. "If I started to fall asleep one of the guards would come and spray water in my face."

A prominent element of the American torture program was the use of humiliation. The captives were evidently kept naked during most of their imprisonment. If they "cooperated" with the CIA interrogators, they might be given clothes or be provided with toilet paper. If their cooperation was deemed insufficient, these privileges would be removed.

Significantly, many of the prisoners report being subjected to waterboarding, exposing the Bush administration's claim that the policy was ended in 2003. Abdelrahim Hussein Abdul Nashiri, of Saudi Arabia, described the experience:

"I would be strapped to a special bed, which would be rotated to a vertical position. A cloth would be placed over my face. Cold water...was then poured onto the cloth by one of the guards so I could not breathe.... The whole process was then repeated during about one hour. Injuries to my ankles and wrists also occurred...as I struggled in the panic of not being able to breathe.... [A] doctor was always present. I think it was to measure my pulse and oxygen content in my blood. So they could take me to [the] breaking point."

It is clear from the ICRC report that the torture program was a large-scale effort, likely involving scores of CIA and military personnel, doctors and psychiatrists. It no doubt involved a great deal of preparation, study, and organization.

Danner makes clear that every specific torture method was cleared in advance with high-ranking Bush administration officials. In an interview with ABC News, CIA interrogator John Kiriakou explained:

It wasn't up to individual interrogators to decide, "Well, I'm gonna slap him. Or I'm going to shake him. Or I'm gonna make him stay up for 48 hours. Each one of these steps...had to have the approval of the Deputy Director for Operations. So before you laid a hand on him, you had to send in the cable saying, "He's uncooperative. Request permission to do X." And that permission would come.... The cable traffic back and forth was extremely specific.

In the case of Zubayadah, authority to carry out specific instances of torture was approved by the National Security Council's Principals Committee, which included Vice President Dick Cheney, National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, and Attorney General John Ashcroft, according to ABC News. Thereafter, CIA Director George Tenet "regularly brought directly to the attention of the highest officials of the government specific procedures to be used on specific detainees," according to Danner.

The CIA has thus far not commented on the report, which broadly substantiates allegations of torture against the agency that may open up for prosecution dozens of its personnel and top leadership. One anonymous official "familiar with the report," told the *Washington Post*, "It is important to bear in mind that the report lays out claims made by the terrorists themselves."

Indeed, while the revelations in the ICRC report are shocking in their graphic detail, they only add depth and the Red Cross's credibility to a substantial body of evidence that proves beyond doubt that Washington violated the Geneva Conventions and the US Constitution with impunity in its treatment of those caught up in the international dragnet it calls "the war on terror."

Moreover, while the report focuses on the fourteen "high-value detainees," similar methods—arrest without charges or recourse to any judicial system, "disappearance" in a global gulag of secret flights and prison camps, and torture—were used against scores, and perhaps thousands of "detainees." Indeed, through internal memos, the Bush administration attempted to build a pseudo-legal basis for torture and elevate it to officially accepted practice.

The Obama administration acts the part of attorney for the Bush administration. It has intervened in numerous ongoing cases in an attempt to suppress information that might prove damaging to the previous government.

This has a threefold motive. In the first place, the Democratic Party is culpable for the same policies. Its congressional leadership was well aware of the systematic torture underway and the gulag of US prisons internationally. The Democrats gave substantial support to the Military Commissions Act of 2006, which stipulated that "No alien unlawful enemy combatant subject to trial by military commission under this chapter may invoke the Geneva Conventions as a source of rights."

Secondly, Obama wishes to avoid damaging revelations that could affect military and intelligence officials who continue to work for his administration.

Most importantly, the Obama administration is intent on continuing Bush's policies in their broad contours, albeit with a somewhat different veneer. While publicly posturing as an opponent of the most egregious elements of the Bush administration's policies, Obama has worked to ensure that the framework of the police state remains intact.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact