

Red Cross report details CIA war crimes

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This week, the *New York Review of Books* released the full version of an International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) report detailing US Central Intelligence Agency torture of 14 “high value” terrorist suspects at prison “black sites” from 2001 until 2006. Earlier, it had produced excerpts of the report and an analysis by author Mark Danner.

The report makes explicit that the CIA violated the laws of war and basic human rights in its treatment of the prisoners, which included beatings, humiliations, sleep deprivation, and suffocation by water (“waterboarding”), among dozens of specifically named acts of brutality.

At several points, the 40-page report refers to CIA actions as illegal according to international law. The ICRC, based in Geneva, Switzerland, is the body tasked with overseeing observance of the laws of war. That it has declared acts carried out by US intelligence personnel as torture carries enormous legal weight.

Yet the Obama administration has granted blanket immunity to CIA, military and Bush administration officials who ordered and carried out torture and other war crimes. An Obama administration spokesman, Mark Mansfield, told the *New York Times* that CIA head Leon Panetta “has stated repeatedly that no one who took actions based on legal guidance from the Department of Justice at the time should be investigated, let alone punished.”

The Obama administration is anxious to avoid prosecution of Bush administration officials for two reasons. First, the report stands as a condemnation not only of the Bush administration, but of leading Democrats, who were well aware of torture, illegal detention, extraordinary rendition and other major violations carried out by the US in the “war on terror.”

Second, the Obama administration wishes to maintain Washington’s full arsenal of repression at its disposal, including torture, in order to carry on longstanding imperialist objectives. Indeed, it is very likely the case that similar abuses as those outlined in the ICRC report continue at US military prison camps in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere.

By virtue of its silence, the US media has joined Obama in its defense of the Bush administration. It should be headline news that the body tasked with overseeing the laws of war, the ICRC, has written a report that all but proves that Washington carried out a large-scale torture operation over several years. But upon its release, the full ICRC report has been relegated to minor-story status by the *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and the television media. The story has been all but dropped since.

For its part, the ICRC has condemned the release of the report, which was produced for high-ranking members of the Bush administration and was declared confidential. Danner has not explained how he obtained a copy. However, the ICRC has verified the report’s authenticity.

The methods of the CIA

The testimony of the 14 detainees repeats descriptions of particular

forms of abuse again and again. This demonstrates not only the systematic nature of the torture regime. Because the prisoners were held incommunicado in solitary confinement, the repetition of experiences demonstrates that their stories were not invented or otherwise planted.

Nine of the 14 detainees were arrested in Pakistan; three in Thailand; and one each in Dubai and Djibouti. Upon their arrest, the detainees were subject to imprisonment and interrogations in the countries where they were found.

They were then shackled hands and feet, and “made to wear a diaper.” According to the report: “Earphones would be placed over his ears.... He would be blindfolded with at least a cloth tied around the head and black goggles.... The detainee was not allowed to go to the toilet and if necessary was obliged to urinate or defecate into the diaper.”

In this way, the abducted men were transported via airplane to the secret gulag of US prisons around the world. The 14 prisoners report being shipped first to Afghanistan to face further interrogation. From there, they lost sense of their location and the lapse of time. Indeed, the ICRC notes that the detention “was specifically designed to cut off contact with the outside world and emphasize a feeling of disorientation and isolation.”

The CIA permitted the prisoners no contact with other prisoners, much less family members or lawyers:

“Throughout the entire period during which they were held [for 11 of the 14, more than three years] the detainees were kept in continuous solitary confinement and incommunicado detention. They had no knowledge of where they were being held, no contact with persons other than their interrogators or guards. Even their guards...did not communicate in any way with the detainees. None had...contact with other persons detained.... None had any contact with legal representation. The 14 had no access to news from the outside world.... None of the 14 had any contact with their families.... They were therefore unable to inform their families of their fate.”

The chapter headings of the ICRC report read as though they might describe prisoner treatment at the hands of the Nazi SS. These include, “Continuous solitary confinement and incommunicado detention,” “Suffocation by water,” “Beatings by use of a collar,” “Beating and Kicking,” “Confinement in a box,” “Prolonged nudity,” “Sleep deprivation and use of loud music,” “Exposure to cold temperature/cold water,” “Prolonged use of handcuffs and shackles,” “Threats,” “Forced Shaving” and “Deprivation/restriction provision of solid food.”

The ICRC describes “suffocation by water,” what the US media refers to by the more innocuous “waterboarding,” in the following manner:

“[T]he person to be suffocated was strapped to a tilting bed and cloth was placed over the face, covering the nose and mouth. Water was then poured continuously over the cloth, saturating it and blocking air so that the person could not breathe. This...induced a feeling of panic and the acute impression that the person was about to die. At a point chosen by the interrogator the cloth was removed and the bed was rotated into a head-up and vertical position so that the person was left hanging by the straps used to secure him to the bed. The procedure was repeated at least twice, if not more often, during a single interrogation session.”

The CIA used a form of torture called “stress standing” on 10 of the 14

prisoners. In these cases, American agents chained the prisoners—who were left naked—by the wrists “to a bar or hook in the ceiling above the head for periods ranging from two or three days continuously, and for up to two or three months intermittently.” One prisoner reported that interrogators removed an artificial leg during these sessions, leaving his one healthy leg to bear the load.

Six of the 14 inmates told the ICRC that thick collars were used to “slam [prisoners] against the walls.” Nine reported suffering daily beatings “involving repeated slapping, punching,” and sometimes kicking. Ten of the 14 report being denied solid food, eight of them for periods lasting from three days to one month.

Many prisoners reported being shackled continuously at the wrists and ankles for months at a time. Forced nudity was the most common form of torture; prisoners report they were kept naked for days, weeks, and even months at a time, often in cells that were maintained at cold temperatures.

In a chilling excerpt, the ICRC describes the CIA’s use of cold water as a torture method, which was reported by seven prisoners:

“In four cases the water was allegedly thrown or poured on the detainees with a bucket or a hose-pipe while held in the stress standing position with their arms shackled above their heads.... Several thought this was in order to clean away the faeces which had run down their legs when they defecated while held in the prolonged stress standing position.... In three cases cold water was also poured over the detainee while he was lying on a plastic sheet raised at the edges by guards to contain the water around his body creating an immersion bath with just the head exposed.”

The CIA made sadistic use of threats, including “electric shocks, infection with HIV, sodomy of the detainee and the arrest and rape of his family....” Other threats were made “by visual means.” In these cases, prisoners were forced to view photos of the images of the tortured bodies of other detainees.

“The role of medical staff”

The ICRC devotes a special section of the report to the role of medical personnel, who in clear violation of their professional and ethical obligations assisted with the torture of the inmates.

One prisoner, Khaled Shaik Mohammed, described medical personnel involved in suffocation by water (waterboarding). Here, the medical staff monitored the oxygen level in Mohammed’s blood stream, advising interrogators to either continue or halt suffocation.

Prisoners who had their hands shackled to the ceiling reported being “monitored by health personnel who in some instances recommended stopping the method of ill-treatment, or recommended its continuation....” One prisoner reported a health worker telling him, “I look after your body only because we need you for information.”

The ICRC admonishes Washington over the role of what appeared to be doctors, psychologists, and nurses involved in torture. “[T]he role of the physician and any other health professional involved in the care of detainees is explicitly to protect them from such ill-treatment and there can be no exception of circumstances invoked to excuse this obligation.”

It further noted that “any interrogation process that requires a health professional to either pronounce on the subjects’ fitness to withstand such procedure, or which requires a health professional to monitor the actual procedure, must have inherent health risks. As such, the interrogation process is contrary to international law and the participation of health personnel in such a process is contrary to international standards of medical ethics.”

The Red Cross lists Washington’s war crimes

The ICRC concludes its document by outlining, in explicit fashion, the war crimes carried out by the Bush administration.

Some of these violations of international law, the ICRC points out, pertain to “undisclosed detention,” whereby the thousands of individuals were swept up in the worldwide American dragnet known as the “war on terror.”

“It is a basic tenet of international law,” the report explains, “that any person deprived of liberty must be registered and held in an officially recognized place of detention.”

The report then lists some of the relevant international laws. “The entire system of detention provided for by the Geneva Convention of 1949,” the report notes, “is based on the idea that detainees must be registered and held in officially recognized places of detention.” The ICRC also lists relevant laws requiring the notification of family members and third parties of detainment.

The prisoners were also denied access to any judicial system, again a violation of international law and the laws of war. “The totality of the circumstances in which the 14 were held effectively amounted to an arbitrary deprivation of liberty and enforced disappearance, in contravention of international law,” the ICRC concludes.

As for prisoner abuse, the ICRC concludes unambiguously that the prisoners’ experiences “amounted to torture and/or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment.”

The ICRC then cites, once again, specific international laws defining torture, including common article 3 of the Geneva Conventions and the 1984 United Nations Convention against Torture. The latter defined torture “as any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted upon a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession....”

In concluding its report, the ICRC writes, “The totality of the circumstances in which they were held effectively amounted to an arbitrary deprivation of liberty and enforced disappearance, in contravention of international law.”

“The allegations of ill-treatment of the detainees indicate that, in many cases, the ill-treatment to which they were subjected while held in the CIA program, either singularly or in combination, constituted torture.”

Settling accounts

There is now overwhelming evidence that the US military and intelligence apparatus has operated and maintained a systematic and long-standing system of secret prisons and torture. This operation was widespread and was utilized against far more individuals than the 14 inmates interviewed by the ICRC. Indeed, the report includes a section entitled “Fate of other persons who passed through the CIA detention program,” which indicates that such methods were likely the norm.

Obama’s pledge to protect CIA, military and Bush administration officials from investigation and prosecution must serve as a warning. Beyond the symbolic change in appearance and rhetoric, the change of administrations in Washington has done nothing to dismantle the US war machine and its monstrous methods.

Unless the perpetrators face justice for their acts, disappearances, torture and worse will ultimately be used against Washington’s political opponents and wider layers of the population.

There is no section of the political establishment that wishes to see Bush administration officials face justice for their crimes. In the end, the

trampling of international law and human rights is an objective expression of the decline of American capitalism, and the ruling class's evermore-ruthless defense of its interests.

The task of the defense, and further advance, of basic human rights falls to the working class.

The author recommends:

Torture and the American ruling class

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