

British secret service chief justifies torture

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With efforts by the Labour government to suppress evidence of collusion with the United States threatened with collapse, the head of Britain's secret service, MI5, last week made a public defence of the use of torture to obtain evidence against alleged terrorists.

MI5 Director General Jonathan Evans spoke at Bristol University on October 15, even as Lord Justice Thomas and Mr. Justice Lloyd Jones were preparing to issue a judgment on whether the Labour government should release a CIA briefing detailing the 2002 interrogation of British resident Binyam Mohamed.

The *Times* of London noted that Evans's statements could be interpreted as commenting on a case that was *sub judice*. One MI5 officer, known as Witness B, is currently being investigated by the Metropolitan Police for "possible criminal wrongdoing."

Ethiopian-born Mohamed was arrested in Pakistan, rendered to Morocco and then detained in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. He was released in February without charge and is suing the British government on the grounds that MI5 was complicit in his torture.

MI5 is accused of supplying questions to be asked, as well as personal information about Mohamed. Mohamed also alleges that an MI5 officer, Witness B, visited him while he was imprisoned in Morocco.

The British government challenged the release of the CIA briefing as a threat to national security. It claimed that release of the document would lead to the United States withdrawing intelligence cooperation.

The judges rejected this argument in their October 16 ruling and accused Foreign Secretary David Miliband of acting in a manner harmful to the rule of law. "Championing the rule of law, not subordinating it, is the cornerstone of democracy," they ruled.

Evans has a personal interest in concealing what happened to Mohamed, as he was the MI5 director responsible for counterterrorism at the time.

In his speech, he argued that the rule of law no longer holds in the so-called "war on terror." He claimed that unlike the world wars of the last century, when the enemy

was Germany, and in contradistinction to the struggle against "international Soviet-inspired communism" and the fight against "international terrorism of the 1970s and 1980s," after 9/11 "the UK and other Western countries were faced with the fact that the terrorist threat posed by Al Qaida was indiscriminate, global and massive."

It was therefore not possible to be too choosy about the methods employed to defeat terrorism. MI5 did not itself, he declared, "torture people, nor do we collude in torture or solicit others to torture people on our behalf." But after 9/11, the agency had to collaborate with countries "where the standards and practices of the local security apparatus were very far removed from our own."

MI5 had perhaps been "slow to detect the emerging pattern of US practice in the period after 9/11," he continued. Nevertheless, "we should recall that notwithstanding these serious issues, the UK has gained huge intelligence benefits from our cooperation with the US agencies in recent years, and the US agencies have been generous in sharing intelligence with us."

This is double-speak. MI5 stands accused not merely of turning a blind eye or being ignorant of abuse by others. Together with the British government, it is accused of suppressing substantial evidence of active collaboration with the US and its client regimes in a programme of extraordinary rendition that amounted to the outsourcing of torture.

Despite the pro-forma denial of direct collusion, Evans's speech remains a naked defence of torture based purely on expediency, i.e., the claim that torture works.

"Operating a security service within a liberal democracy does, of course, pose problems and occasionally dilemmas," he said. His answer to such "dilemmas" is the assertion that the rules of democratic governance do not apply where the fight against terrorism is concerned.

Evans's speech is a telling indication of how far the erosion of basic democratic rights has progressed. He cites a number of restraints on the security service acting illegally, including the authority of the home secretary and accountability to "the Intelligence and Security

Committee of parliamentarians.” In reality, those charged with supervision of MI5 agree that the rule of law should no longer apply.

A significant portion of his speech was based on a citation from an August, 2009, article by Miliband and the home secretary, Alan Johnson, insisting that “Intelligence from overseas is critical to our success in stopping terrorism.” The article went on to state that while “we have to work hard to ensure that we do not collude in torture or mistreatment...it is not possible to eradicate all risk.”

The home and foreign Secretaries recognize “that we operate in a complex environment where easy answers are not available to us,” Evans declared.

Miliband is continuing to challenge the ruling by Lord Justices Thomas and Jones. His stance is supported by the Obama administration.

The justification of criminal actions in the name of combating terrorism is a direct and immediate threat to the democratic rights of every British resident. MI5 has undergone a massive expansion in recent years. By the end of 2010 it will be twice the size it was in 2001, standing at 4,100 employees.

The British state sets aside £1.86 billion to run MI5, MI6 and the GCHQ spy centre, with MI5 taking the lion’s share. The organization admits to having under surveillance 2,000 people who are considered a threat to national security, but this is the tip of the iceberg. The security services keep files on innumerable political activists and trade unionists, who will be treated no differently to those accused of terrorism should the need arise.

The insistence that torture is permissible is only one manifestation of the incompatibility of the turn to militarism and colonial wars of conquest with the preservation of democratic norms. The wars and occupations carried out by Britain alongside the US in Afghanistan and Iraq are predatory and illegal, aimed at securing control of vital reserves of oil and gas. They were justified with false claims following 9/11 that they were necessary to combat the threat posed by Al Qaeda and “rogue states.” Both wars were launched on the basis of lies and in defiance of overwhelming popular opposition.

As the tragedy these wars unleashed in Iraq and Afghanistan worsened, ever more draconian measures were adopted against terrorist dangers both real and spurious. Torture was routinely utilized to secure false confessions designed to justify the war-mongering of

Washington and London and the passage of repressive legislation aimed at intimidating those opposed to war. It was, for example, through the torture of captured Al Qaeda operative Abu Zubaydah that the Bush government fabricated evidence of links between Al Qaeda and the regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq.

Among the methods used to extract “evidence” from Binyam Mohamed was the threat of torture with the aid of razor blades. His confession was the basis of the allegation that US citizen José Padilla was planning a “dirty bomb” attack on US cities. After Padilla was held for years in a military brig, denied any contact with lawyers or relatives and subjected to torture, the “dirty bomb” charge was dropped and Padilla was tried and convicted in a civil court on the unrelated charge of conspiracy in plans for an overseas jihad and the funding of terrorist groups operating outside the US.

The drive to militarism and war is dictated by a financial elite at the apex of society for the purpose of seizing the resources of the entire planet. It is bound up with an historically unprecedented accumulation of personal wealth by an oligarchy, carried out through the immiseration of the international working class.

The imperialist ruling elites resort to the abrogation of constitutional and legal norms, because it impossible to secure a popular mandate for policies inimical to the interests of the vast majority. The resulting class tensions are increasingly incompatible with democratic methods of rule.

The assault on democratic rights can be combated only through the development of an independent political movement of the international working class against the profit system, which is the source of poverty, repression and war.

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