

Torture continues at US prisons in Afghanistan

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Recent media reports reveal that the US military continues to carry on torture and illegal detention in Afghanistan at a dungeon known to inmates as “the black prison.”

The jail, located on the Bagram Air Base next to the notorious Bagram prison north of Kabul, operates under the executive order of President Obama. After entering office, Obama ordered the closure of Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) prison “black sites”—which were in fact no longer active—but exempted those prisons run by the military’s Special Operations, which was headed from 2003 until 2008 by General Stanley McChrystal, now US commander of the Af-Pak theater.

US military officials recently said they had no plans to close the Afghan jail and another like it at the Balad Air Base in Iraq, which they claimed were needed to interrogate “high-value detainees.”

Two teenage Afghan boys told the *Washington Post* that they were beaten, photographed naked, sexually humiliated, denied sleep, and held in solitary confinement by American guards at the prison this year. Interviewed at a juvenile detention center in Kabul, where they have been transferred, “the teenagers presented a detailed, consistent portrait” of the abuse they experienced, the newspaper reported. Their descriptions of the prison were confirmed by two other former prisoners.

In addition to being punched and slapped, Rashid, who the *Post* describes as “younger than 16,” said he was forced to view pornography “alongside a photograph of his mother.” He was also forced to strip naked in front of about a half-dozen US soldiers. “They touched me all over my body,” he said. “They took pictures, and they were laughing and laughing. They were doing everything.”

“That was the hardest time I have ever had in my life,” said Rashid, who was arrested this spring. “It was better to just kill me. But they would not kill me. ... I was just crying and crying. I was too young.”

New York Saturday, published with three former inmates who also spoke of the black prison near Bagram. Each informant “was interviewed separately and described similar conditions,” the *Times* notes, and “[t]heir descriptions also matched those obtained by two human rights workers who had interviewed other former detainees at the site.” One of the three men was arrested months after Obama’s inauguration as US president, as were the two teenage boys interviewed by the *Post*.

All of those interviewed by the *Times* and the *Post* maintained that they were not “Taliban.” Without being charged with a crime, they were seized by US soldiers, then bound, gagged, and hooded, and taken to the “black prison.”

The jail, according to the *Times’* sources, “consists of individual windowless concrete cells, each illuminated by a single light bulb glowing 24 hours a day.” The cells are small; one prisoner said his was only slightly longer than the length of his body. US soldiers throw food into the cells through slots in the door.

Prisoners are exposed to extreme cold and sleep deprivation. The teenage boys told the *Post* that when they attempted to sleep on the hard floor, US soldiers “shouted at them and hammered on their cells.” Prisoners’ only respite from this extreme solitary confinement are twice-a-day interrogations, during which some are beaten or humiliated.

“He kept asking me, ‘Tell us the truth.’ I told them the truth more than 10 times,” Mohammad told the *Post*. “That I’m a farmer, my father was a farmer, my brother was a farmer. But they said, ‘No, help us with this case. Tell us the truth.’ That’s why he was slapping me.”

The prisoners are held in these conditions for weeks—35 to 40 days, according to the *Times*—their families unaware of their fate. “For my whole family it was disastrous,” said

Hayatullah, a Kandahar resident who said he was working in his pharmacy when he was arrested. “Because they knew the Americans were sometimes killing people, and they thought they had killed me because for two to three months they didn’t know where I was.”

Hamidullah, who was held five and a half months in detention, including five to six weeks in the black jail, said he heard the sounds of other detainees being tortured and abused. “They beat up other people in the black jail, but not me,” he said. “But the problem was that they didn’t let me sleep. There was shouting noise so you couldn’t sleep.”

Interrogators insisted he was a Taliban fighter named Faida Muhammad. “I said, ‘That’s not me,’” he recalled. “They blamed me and said, ‘You are making bombs and are a facilitator of bomb making and helping militants,’” he said. “I said, ‘I have a shop. I sell spare parts for vehicles, for trucks and cars.’”

The US military permits no contact with the outside world, and in violation of international law, denies the International Committee of the Red Cross access to the secret prison.

Gulham Khan, a 25-year-old sheep trader, who mostly delivers sheep and goats for people who buy the animals in the livestock market in Ghazni, was captured in late October 2008 and released in early September this year. He told the *Times*, “They kept saying to me, ‘Are you Qari Idris?’ I said, ‘I’m not Qari Idris.’ But they kept asking me over and over, and I kept saying, ‘I’m Gulham. This is my name, that is my father’s name, you can ask the elders.’”

Ten months after his initial detention, American soldiers went to the group cell where he was then being held and told him he had been mistakenly picked up under the wrong name, Khan told the *Times*. “They said, ‘Please accept our apology, and we are sorry that we kept you here for this time.’ And that was it. They kept me for more than 10 months and gave me nothing back.”

The *Times* noted, “In their search for him, Mr. Khan’s family members spent the equivalent of \$6,000, a fortune for a sheep dealer, who often makes just a dollar a day. Some of the money was spent on bribes to local Afghan soldiers to get information on where he was being held; they said soldiers took the money and never came back with the information.”

“This is something nobody can bear. It’s extraordinary,” said Malik Mohammad Hassan, a tribal elder from the Jalalabad area, “They treated us like wild animals.”

After Special Operations soldiers have finished interrogating the prisoners, they are transferred to the regular Bagram prison where they are packed into cages holding approximately 20 men each.

Bagram, which reputedly holds an estimated 700 inmates, is a hated symbol of US imperialism to Afghans—so much that the Obama administration has announced its intention to end its use as a prison. Prisoners at Bagram are denied access to legal assistance or the right to know the charges and evidence against them. There have been many reports of torture there, among them at least two cases in which prisoners were brutally beaten to death by US soldiers; one of these cases is memorialized by the documentary *Taxi to the Dark Side*.

The revelations of torture and illegal detention continuing under Obama give the lie to his claim that the war in Afghanistan is about “protecting the American people” and “fighting terrorism.”

Washington aims to subjugate Afghanistan in order to place the US military close to the region’s oil and gas reserves and to head off the growing influence of other powers in the region. It is acutely aware that defeat and withdrawal would spell a drastic weakening of its global position.

These predatory aims require the US military to terrorize and intimidate the entire Afghan population. It is notable that those prisoners interviewed by the *Times* and the *Post* were ordinary Afghans—a wood carver, a farmer, a sheep herder, a pharmacist, a retired teacher, and a used parts dealer—all of whom denied any involvement with the Taliban.

Obama’s decision to increase the US military presence in Afghanistan by 30,000 soldiers and escalate the dirty colonial war will inevitably result in more horrors perpetrated against the people of Afghanistan.



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