

US continues to detain, torture prisoners at secret Afghan base

David Walsh
12 May 2010

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has confirmed to the British Broadcasting Corporation that the US military is operating a second “black jail” at its Bagram airbase near Kabul in Afghanistan, contrary to the Pentagon’s public denials.

The BBC’s Hilary Andersson writes that in response to a question about the existence of the secret facility, “The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) said that since August 2009 US authorities have been notifying it of names of detained people in a separate structure at Bagram.” The Red Cross has not had access to these prisoners.

At that site, according to numerous former detainees, prisoners are abused, beaten, humiliated and subjected to sleep deprivation, sensory deprivation and other forms of torture.

The BBC reported on the second Bagram detention facility in April. At the time, Andersson cited the comments of nine witnesses, interviewed separately, who provided similar descriptions of conditions at the “secret jail.” The former detainees told of being beaten by American soldiers at the time of their arrests, being locked in tiny, windowless concrete cells, in which a light bulb was constantly illuminated, and being prevented from sleeping by various means.

When the BBC put the allegations to Pentagon officials in April, the latter denied any abuse and the existence of the secret site. Vice Admiral Robert Harward, in charge of the new Parwan detention facility, said, “I’ve never heard of it. This [Parwan] is the only detention facility in Afghanistan.” As the Red Cross statement makes clear, Harward was lying.

In response to a question from a reporter in January, Harward declared, “There are no black-jail secret prisons.... We do have field detention sites we do not disclose, but they’re held there for very short periods, and then they’re moved—if they’re determined to need additional internment, they’re moved to the detention facility at Parwan or released.” Again, Harward was lying through his teeth. He will not, of course, be called to account by anyone.

The *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* reported in

November 2009 the allegations of numerous Afghan detainees, some of them teenagers, about a “black” site at Bagram. The *Post*’s article noted that the prisoners “appeared to have been in a facility run by U.S. Special Operations forces that is separate from the Bagram Theater Internment Facility, the main American-run prison, which holds about 700 detainees.”

The *Times* pointed out that when Barack Obama “signed an order to eliminate so-called black sites run by the Central Intelligence Agency in January [2009], it did not also close this jail, which is run by military Special Operations forces.”

Both the *Post* and the *Times* reported horrific allegations. One of the teenagers detained at Bagram, Rashid, a woodcutter from the Sabari district of Khost province, told the *Post* that “he lived in a small concrete cell that was slightly longer than the length of his body. Food was tossed in a plastic bag through a slot in the metal door. Both teenagers said that when they tried to sleep, on the floor, their captors shouted at them and hammered on their cells.

“When summoned for daily interrogations, Rashid said, he was made to wear a hood, handcuffs and ear coverings and was marched into the meeting room. He said he was punched by his interrogators while being prodded to admit ties to the Taliban; he denied such ties. During some sessions, he said, his interrogator forced him to look at pornographic movies and magazines while also showing him a photograph of his mother.

“I was just crying and crying. I was too young,” Rashid said. “I didn’t know what a prison looks like or what a prison is.”

One of the detainees, a farmer named Hamidullah, told the *Times*, “The black jail was the most dangerous and fearful place. It is a place where everybody is afraid. In the black jail, they can do anything to detainees. They don’t let the ICRC officials or any other civilians see or communicate with the people they keep there.” None of the individuals interviewed were ever charged with a crime.

After the initial BBC report about the secret jail in April, an Amnesty International USA blog noted “the complete

lack of interest that the US media has taken in the story...the silence has been deafening.” Now the confirmation by the Red Cross of the accuracy of that report, in the face of Pentagon stonewalling, has also elicited next to no interest.

Human rights activists now refer to Bagram as “Obama’s Guantánamo.”

The conditions at the officially acknowledged Parwan detention facility at Bagram, where 800 detainees are currently held, are savage enough. The BBC’s Andersson was allowed into the prison for an hour in April. This is what she described:

“In the new jail, prisoners were being moved around in wheelchairs with goggles and headphones on.

“The goggles were blacked out, and the purpose of the headphones was to block out all sound. Each prisoner was handcuffed and had their legs shackled.

“Prisoners are kept in 56 cells, which the prisoners refer to as ‘cages.’ The front of the cells are made of mesh, the ceiling is clear, and the other three walls are solid.

“Guards can see down into the cells [from] above.”

This is what US military spokesmen refer to as “humane” treatment. Col. John Garrity, a commander at Bagram, told the *Washington Post* in November, “I want to be clear that there is no harsh treatment at all.”

In June 2009 the BBC reported on allegations by 27 inmates at Bagram, none of whom either was ever charged with any offense or put on trial: “Many allegations of ill-treatment appear repeatedly in the interviews: physical abuse, the use of stress positions, excessive heat or cold, unbearably loud noise, being forced to remove clothes in front of female soldiers.

“In four cases detainees were threatened with death at gunpoint.

““They did things that you would not do against animals let alone to humans,” said one inmate known as Dr. Khandan.

““They poured cold water on you in winter and hot water in summer. They used dogs against us. They put a pistol or a gun to your head and threatened you with death,” he said.

““They put some kind of medicine in the juice or water to make you sleepless and then they would interrogate you.””

This kind of barbaric treatment is defined as torture and banned by various international laws and conventions.

The Obama administration, following in the footsteps of its predecessor, has intervened to prevent elemental legal rights being granted to Bagram detainees. In a case brought by the International Justice Network (IJN) on behalf of two Yemenis and one Tunisian citizen, who have been held incommunicado at Bagram for more than six years, the Obama Justice Department has argued that because Afghanistan is an active war zone the minimal rights

available to Guantánamo detainees should be denied prisoners held in that country.

Using the same reactionary language as the Bush-Cheney-Rove cabal, lawyers for the Obama administration have insisted that granting detainees legal rights could harm the president’s “ability to succeed in armed conflict and to protect the United States’ forces” by limiting his powers to conduct military operations.

Tina Foster, executive director of the IJN, told the media last year that Bagram inmates exist “in a legal black-hole, without access to lawyers or courts.” She accused the new administration of “using the same arguments as the Bush White House.”

In an interview with *Spiegel Online* posted in September 2009, Foster noted, “Unfortunately, the US government did not change its position on Bagram when Obama took office. The government still claims that our clients are not entitled to any legal protections under US law. It maintains that even those individuals who they brought to Bagram from other countries, and have held without charge for more than six years, are still not entitled to speak with their attorney, and they are arguing now that they are not entitled to have their cases heard in US courts.”

The *Spiegel* interviewer asked, “But what then is the difference between the Bush and Obama administrations?”

“Foster: There is absolutely no difference between the Bush administration and the Obama administration’s position with respect to Bagram detainees’ rights. They have made much ado about nothing, in the hope that the courts and the public will not examine the issue more closely.”



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