Mounting criticism of US torture of Private Bradley Manning

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The American Civil Liberties Union sent a letter March 16 to the US defense secretary, Robert Gates, charging that the treatment of Army private Bradley Manning, held in solitary confinement at the Quantico Marine base outside Washington, is a violation of the Eighth Amendment prohibition of "cruel and unusual punishment.

The ACLU protest is one of hundreds received by the US government over the past week, including editorials in a half dozen major US newspapers, all criticizing the abusive and humiliating treatment being meted out to Manning. Protest demonstrations are scheduled worldwide this weekend, against the torture of Manning and to mark the eighth anniversary of the illegal US invasion of Iraq.

The Army private has been charged with 22 counts related to the alleged leaking of US military and diplomatic documents to WikiLeaks. These documents provide massive evidence of US war crimes in both Iraq and Afghanistan and diplomatic scheming directed at the subversion or overthrow of governments at odds with US foreign policy. At least one of the charges against Manning, "aiding the enemy," could bring a death sentence.

The ACLU's executive director, Anthony Romero, wrote in his letter to Gates, "Based on

the reports of Private Manning and his counsel, it is clear the gratuitously harsh treatment to which the Department of Defense is subjecting Private Manning violates fundamental constitutional norms….

"No legitimate purpose is served by keeping Private Manning stripped naked; in prolonged isolated confinement and utter idleness; subjected to sleep deprivation through repeated physical inspections throughout the night; deprived of any meaningful opportunity to exercise, even in his cell; and stripped of his reading glasses so that he cannot read. Absent any evident justification, such treatment is clearly forbidden by our Constitution."

As for the requirement by military jailers that Manning stand naked in his observation cell every morning, for a prolonged period of inspection, the ACLU asserted, "The very purpose of such treatment is to degrade, humiliate, and traumatize."

Manning has been held in solitary confinement since he arrived at Quantico in July—a stretch of eight months of isolation that, by itself, should be classified as torture, particularly for a prisoner who is awaiting trial and has not been convicted of any offense.

Psychiatrists at the military brig have assessed Manning as no danger to himself, and he has no history of violence. At 5' 2" and 105 pounds, he is hardly a threat to his Marine Corps jailers or fellow inmates. Base commanders have nonetheless placed him on 24/7 Prevention of Injury (POI) watch, which includes both the constant nude inspections and regular sleep disruption. In other words, on the pretext of *preventing* self-harm, his jailers are seeking to *cause* him harm, and, if possible, destroy him psychologically and mentally.

Far from preventing suicide, the POI regime may be intended to provoke it. Terry Kupers, a criminology professor and expert on psychiatric conditions among prison inmates, wrote in an opinion piece carried on CNN.com, "One of the most stunning statistics in criminology today is that, on average, 50% of US prisoner suicides happen among the 2% to 8% of prisoners who are in solitary confinement, also known as segregation."

Manning is subjected to this regimen, deliberately calculated to break him, both as punishment for his alleged whistle-blowing activity, and to coerce him into providing testimony against WikiLeaks and its co-founder Julian Assange, even though WikiLeaks receives leaks on a "blind" basis and Assange maintains he had no knowledge of Manning until after his arrest.

In an 11-page letter from prison, Manning has pointed out the absurd contradictions in the Pentagon's effort to defend its vindictive treatment. He explains that he was compelled to sleep naked after he made a sarcastic remark to his jailers that if he really wanted to commit suicide, he could do so with the elastic in his underwear.

He declares the decision "clearly punitive in nature," adding, "There is no mental health justification for the

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decision. I am under 24-hour surveillance, with guards never being more than a few feet away from my cell. I am permitted to have my underwear and clothing during the day, with no apparent concern that I will harm myself during this time period. The determination to strip me of all my clothing every night since 2 March 2011 is without justification and therefore constitutes unlawful pretrial punishment."

In his first public comment since his son was arrested, former military veteran Brian Manning spoke with a correspondent for the PBS "Frontline" program, which will broadcast a report on the Bradley Manning case on March 29. According to a PBS press release, he found the conditions in which his son is imprisoned "shocking."

"This is someone who has not gone to trial or been convicted of anything," he told "Frontline." "They worry about people down in a base in Cuba, but here they are, have someone on our own soil, under their own control, and they're treating him this way…. It's shocking enough that I would come out of our silence as a family and say…you've crossed a line. This is wrong."

Bradley Manning's mother Susan is Welsh—she married Brian when he was an American soldier stationed in Britain—and she has previously spoken out in his defense. Amnesty International UK has called on the British government to demand improved conditions, on the grounds that he attended high school in Britain while living with his mother, who is now divorced from his father.

Last week the House of Commons was asked to schedule a debate on his treatment, which one MP compared to the treatment of US prisoners at the Guantánamo Bay detention camp. Foreign Secretary William Hague denied that Manning was a British citizen or had asked for British government assistance in his current confinement. He claimed that as a result, the government had "limited standing" to inquire with US officials about Manning's treatment.

Last Sunday, State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley resigned after critical comments he made about the treatment of Manning by the Pentagon were made public by a blogger. Crowley had been defending Manning's pretrial detention, but called the conditions under which he was held "ridiculous and counterproductive and stupid."

Since then many of the major US newspapers have published editorials criticizing the treatment of Manning.

The *San Francisco Chronicle* commented that "it's hard to escape the feeling that these measures are intended to punish Manning before he's even had a trial."

The *Los Angeles Times* wrote, "It's hard to resist the conclusion that punishment, not protection, is the purpose of these degrading measures.... Manning's treatment should reflect the fact that he remains innocent until proven guilty."

The *Boston Globe* declared, "The Army is exposing him to treatment that conjures up visions of abusive prisoner-of-war camps and should never be sanctioned for someone on pretrial detainment."

The *New York Times* editorialized, "The military has been treating him abusively, in a way that conjures creepy memories of how the Bush administration used to treat terror suspects," but went on to describe Obama's support for such treatment "inexplicable."

The *Washington Post*, a fervent supporter of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, wrote, "Mr. Manning's treatment comes uncomfortably close to the kind of intimidating and humiliating tactics disavowed after the abuses at the Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo prisons that eroded the country's standing in the world."

The corporate-controlled media had been largely silent about the abuse of Bradley Manning until Crowley's statement and resignation. In other words, until it was validated by a top government spokesman, one who had 26 years of military service to demonstrate he was no "bleeding heart," the editors of these major daily newspapers could not bring themselves to criticize torture ordered by their own government.

Much of the criticism was couched in the same terms as Crowley's, focusing on the damage to US foreign policy as much as the damage to Manning's constitutional rights, health and sanity.

Thus the *Globe* noted, in its editorial, "At a time when the Obama administration is straining to calibrate its response to the democracy movements billowing across the Arab world, the United States should not be treating Manning in a manner that in any way resembles how Mideast autocrats handle their countries' dissidents."

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