British government presses US over treatment of Bradley Manning

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British officials indicated Tuesday that the government would press the US to moderate its treatment of Army Private Bradley Manning, who has been kept in solitary confinement for months and subjected to other torturous conditions. By law, Manning has British citizenship rights through his mother, who is Welsh.

Manning faces 34 charges of leaking classified material—including evidence of numerous US war crimes committed in Iraq—to the whistleblower organization WikiLeaks. Yet to appear in court, Manning is being held as a political prisoner by the Obama administration at a Marine Corps brig in Quantico, Virginia. The 23-year-old soldier has been held in solitary confinement there 23 hours a day since July 2010.

On March 2, the Army filed 22 additional charges on top of 12 others, including "aiding the enemy," which carry sentences of life in prison or the death penalty. Since that day, Manning has been subjected to nightly strip-downs and even more abusive treatment.

Labour MP Ann Clwyd read a statement of protest at the close of a virtually empty House of Commons session April 4. Clwyd, a former special envoy on human rights to Iraq and chair of the all-parliamentary committee on human rights, stated that the conditions in which Manning is held served "no purpose other than to humiliate and degrade Bradley Manning. I regard it as cruel and unnecessary."

In spite of the fact that his mother is Welsh and that, as a teenager, Manning lived with her and attended high school in Britain, UK authorities initially attempted to deflect questions over his rights. Foreign Secretary William Hague has denied that Manning was a British citizen and insisted that as a result, the UK had "limited standing" to inquire about the soldier's imprisonment.

On Monday, Foreign Office Minister Henry Bellingham finally confirmed that Manning qualifies as a British citizen by law, but that the soldier had not formally requested help from the British government.

In her speech, Clwyd read from an 11-page letter written March 10 by Manning to the commanding officer of the Quantico base, issued through his lawyer. The letter outlines extensive harassment and abuse, including physical intimidation by four guards after protests over his mistreatment were held outside the brig.

In his letter, Manning reviews his consistently positive psychiatric evaluations by the military mental staff and their judgment that he was not suicidal. In spite of these evaluations, Manning notes, he was placed on "prevention of injury" watch, denied his clothing and subjected to sleep deprivation through repeated inspections.

"Since 2 March 2011, I have been stripped of all my clothing at night," Manning wrote. "I've been told by the PCF [Pretrial Confinement Facility] commander intends on continuing this practice indefinitely. Initially after surrendering my clothing to the brig guards, I had no choice but to lay naked in my cold jail cell until the following morning. The next morning I was told to get out of my bed for the morning Duty Brig Supervisor inspection. I was not given any of my clothing back. I got out of the bed and immediately started to shiver because of how cold it was in my cell…. The guard told me to stand at parade rest, which required me to stand with my hands behind my back and my legs spaced shoulder width apart. I stood at 'parade rest' for about three minutes until the DBS arrived." Manning described his humiliation as the guards filed past his cell.

He also described being under continuous surveillance. "The guards checked on me every five minutes during the day by asking me if I am okay," he wrote. "I am required to respond in some affirmative manner. At night, if the guards cannot see me clearly, because I have a blanket over my head or I am curled up towards the wall, they will wake me in order to ensure that I am okay."

In addition to this mistreatment, Manning has also been

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denied any opportunity for physical activity in his cell. For the one hour that he is allowed to exercise, he is taken to an empty room to walk in a figure-eight. He is not permitted any personal items, or even a pillow or sheets for his bed. He has been stripped of his glasses, which he wrote left him unable to read and essentially blind.

Such a regimen is being imposed on the young soldier not to prevent a suicidal mental state, but to cause one. The Obama administration requires a means of implicating WikiLeaks co-founder Julian Assange in Manning's alleged downloading of classified government documents. The government aims to extract testimony from Manning tying Assange to the leak so that it can extradite the Australian national and prosecute him under US sedition laws. In order to get such testimony, the military must destroy Manning's considerable will power and his mental capabilities.

Manning's persecution is also meant to serve as an example for other would-be whistleblowers within the military and government, and to set a precedent for media outlets and other organizations that might publish exposures of criminality.

The American Civil Liberties Union, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and many other human rights organizations have denounced the conditions in which Manning is being held as tantamount to torture. Amnesty International and other groups have implored the British government to intervene in the case.

A few voices from within the political establishment have expressed concern over the potential for popular backlash against the torture of Bradley Manning. Expressing this concern, State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley last month characterized the government's treatment of the soldier as "ridiculous and counterproductive and stupid." He was forced to resign almost immediately after the remark, made during a question-and-answer session to an audience of 20 at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

In a March 29 editorial in the British *Guardian*, Crowley reiterated that he fully endorsed Manning's imprisonment, but that "the United States cannot expect others to meet international standards if we are seen as falling short."

During her statement Monday night, MP Clwyd approvingly cited Crowley's remarks and warned that the US and British both risked damaging supposed "moral authority" in world politics. "It is my view that some of the greatest damage was caused to British and American efforts in Iraq when the stories of prisoner abuse emerged," she said. "It undermined our moral authority when we needed to explain that we were fighting for a better future for Iraq. The United States—and the UK, in the way we respond to actions of the US—needs to preserve that moral authority if we are to have a positive impact on the world and lead by example."

Clwyd insisted that Manning's case was important, not for the democratic rights of the soldier, let alone for the working class as a whole for whom WikiLeaks has done an invaluable service. For the political elites in Britain, the case matters "because of the message it sends out to the rest of the world about what kind of treatment the United States thinks is acceptable for people in detention. And, for us, it is important what we say—or what we don't say.

"That matters in places where human rights are not nearly so well observed," Clwyd commented. "People will pay attention in China and in Russia—and in Libya, where we want to be on the side of those fighting for freedom from state repression. And most of all in Afghanistan: it matters to those UK and US service personnel fighting in Afghanistan what kind of image Britain and the US have in the world."

In response to Clwyd's statement, Foreign Office Minister Bellingham commented that "the fact that we have seen the memo from Private Manning to his commanding officer is evidence that his legal representation is working. We must allow a legal case to follow its course without interfering."

Bellingham stated that the British embassy in Washington, D.C., had discussed Manning's treatment with US officials on March 29, but that he would "instruct our officials at our embassy in Washington again to report our concerns to officials in the State Department." "All people who are detained in custody deserve to be treated in detention according to the highest international standards, and we certainly expect nothing else, nothing less, from the United States," Bellingham said. He insisted, however, that President Obama had "sought and received assurances from the Department of Defense that Private Manning's treatment is 'appropriate' and meets US 'basic standards.' "

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