

Guantánamo: A decade of US torture and repression

Bill Van Auken
13 January 2012

This week marks ten years since the first prisoners in Washington's "global war on terror" arrived at the Guantánamo Bay Naval Base in Cuba, drugged, hooded and shackled. A decade has passed, and the infamous prison camp remains open, its criminal operations codified by Congress and President Barack Obama into US law.

The Bush administration established the detention center with the explicit aim of holding prisoners as "enemy combatants", a term invented to deny them any rights either under the US Constitution as criminal defendants or under the Geneva Conventions as prisoners of war. The Bush Justice Department ruled that the naval base lay outside the jurisdiction of any American court, and therefore those held there could seek no legal redress over their imprisonment.

This arrangement was designed to create the ideal environment for a regime of torture and war crimes against those who were swept up by the US military and intelligence apparatus and dragged to Guantánamo from around the world.

Detainees were subjected to waterboarding and "dryboarding" (in which rags are stuffed down a victim's throat and his mouth and nose are taped shut to induce asphyxiation), hung from the ceiling, placed in stress positions, beaten, tortured with barbed wire and broken glass, subjected to sleep deprivation and to prolonged detention under extreme temperatures or in the dark. Sexual humiliation was routinely employed to break down detainees as was degradation of their religion.

Those who protested torture by engaging in hunger strikes have been subjected to excruciating forced feedings, with plastic tubes shoved through their nose and throat and into their stomach.

Men were tortured to death, driven to suicide and left

blinded, crippled, and mentally and emotionally devastated by years of such treatment.

While the Bush administration insisted that the 775 people who were imprisoned at Guantánamo were "the worst of the worst," according to the US government's own records 92 percent of them had no connection whatsoever to Al Qaeda or terrorism. Only seven individuals—less than one percent of those detained—have ever been charged with any crime. The vast majority were hapless victims of the US terror war, sold to the Americans for bounties offered in Pakistan and Afghanistan or grabbed off the streets elsewhere solely because of their nationality and religion.

Internationally, the name Guantánamo became synonymous with US militarism, criminality and aggression.

Obama, now completing his third year in the White House, was elected in 2008 in large measure thanks to his promise of "change", which appealed to popular hostility and revulsion toward the years of aggressive war, sweeping attacks on basic democratic rights, and the shameless use of torture under the Bush administration.

Within the American ruling elite, it was hoped that the election of the Democrat and first African-American president could refurbish Washington's image abroad, even as US imperialism continued to pursue the same essential policies.

More than any other single act, Obama sought to symbolize the supposed change embodied in his administration by pledging to close down Guantánamo within his first year in office. He declared Guantánamo a "sad chapter in American history" that would be brought to a close.

By November of 2009, the administration acknowledged that it would not comply with its own

deadline, instead postponing Guantánamo's closure to an unspecified date in 2010.

Obama's pledge was never anything more than symbolic. As his administration subsequently made clear, it was not renouncing the practices that made the Guantánamo prison camp notorious—indefinite detention without trial, extraordinary rendition and torture. It was merely seeking to close the facility itself, while continuing such criminal operations elsewhere.

Indeed, it prepared plans for the opening of a "Guantánamo north," under which detainees would be transferred from Cuba to a prison facility in the US where they would continue to be held without charges or trials.

Meanwhile, thousands were kept under similar conditions of imprisonment at facilities, such as Bagram in Afghanistan and secret CIA sites, while the Obama administration rigorously defended its predecessors against any lawsuits over the torture and other crimes they committed in office.

In January 2011, Obama signed into law a military funding authorization bill that prohibited the transfer of Guantánamo detainees to facilities in the US and effectively barred the prison camp's closure. Two months later, the White House issued an order for the resumption of drumhead trials before military commissions. Obama's executive order also made indefinite detention the official policy of his administration.

Then on December 31 of last year, Obama signed the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), which contains provisions legalizing the military's indefinite detention without charges or trials of citizens and non-citizens alike. The measure essentially upends the US Constitution, the Bill of Rights and the centuries-old right of habeas corpus, writing into the law of the land the methods of a military-police dictatorship.

There are still 171 men imprisoned at Guantánamo. Twelve of them have spent the entire decade there, only one of them having been charged and convicted of any offense. Their continued detention is a crime that cries out for immediate redress, including the holding of all those who sent, kept and tortured them there accountable.

This is hardly just a matter of clearing up some unfinished business from the previous administration. The continuation and deepening of the turn towards

police state methods initiated under the Bush administration are proof that they were not merely the product of one party or political ideology, but rather the outcome of deep-going contradictions within American capitalism.

Above all, they have been driven by the unprecedented polarization between a tiny wealthy elite, the top 1 percent, which monopolizes wealth and political power, and the vast mass of working people, who are politically disenfranchised and have seen their incomes, jobs and living conditions undergo relentless assault.

The levels of social inequality existing in America today make any genuine democratic processes impossible. With the protracted economic crisis giving rise to social protest and class struggle, the ruling elite is turning to ever more direct forms of state repression to defend its power and privileges.

The actions taken by the Obama White House threaten to bring the criminal methods of Guantánamo home to the US itself for use against the American working class.

The defense of democratic rights, including the dismantling of the entire repressive system associated with Guantánamo, can be prosecuted only by the working class mobilizing its independent strength in the struggle to take political power, put an end to capitalism and reorganize the economy to meet human needs rather than private profit.

Bill Van Auken



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact