

UN torture official denounces US treatment of Bradley Manning

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The UN's top torture official has denounced the US government's "cruel, inhuman" treatment of Bradley Manning. The 24-year-old Army private has been held for nearly 20 months, accused of leaking documentary evidence of US war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan to the whistleblower organization WikiLeaks.

Speaking Monday at a UN Human Rights Council meeting in Geneva, Juan Ernesto Mendez, the UN special rapporteur on torture, told AFP, "I believe Bradley Manning was subjected to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment in the excessive and prolonged isolation he was put in during the eight months he was in Quantico," referring to the US military prison near Washington DC.

Manning faces 22 charges under the Espionage Act, including "aiding the enemy." Although military prosecutors have stated previously that they are "only" pursuing a sentence of life in prison, Manning may still be subject to the death penalty under court martial.

Manning entered no plea in the opening hearing of his military court martial on February 23. The torturous treatment he has faced in prison has been aimed at forcing him into precisely such a plea to aid in the government's case against WikiLeaks' founder Julian Assange.

The UN torture investigator's denunciation of Manning's treatment concerns the eight months he was held in Quantico before being moved in April 2011 to Fort Leavenworth prison in Kansas. Mendez said that while "fortunately" Manning's conditions of confinement had supposedly improved after the transfer, "the explanation I was given for those eight months was not convincing for me."

During this period, Manning was held in maximum custody and virtual isolation, locked in his cell 23 hours a day and kept under 24-hour surveillance. He was

stripped of his clothing at night, and permitted extremely limited access to reading material. For more than a week in early March 2011 he was forced to stand totally naked for morning inspection in front of his cell.

Over the past year, UN special rapporteur Mendez repeatedly complained through official US government channels that his investigation into the treatment of Manning was being obstructed by the Obama administration. Mendez sought to gain unrestricted access to the prisoner, but was repeatedly rebuffed.

After several meetings with Obama administration officials, the US Department of Defense agreed to allow Mendez to visit Manning in prison, but stipulated that their conversation would be monitored. A July 12, 2011 statement by the UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner states: "On humanitarian grounds and under protest, Mendez offered to Manning, through his counsel, to visit him under these restrictive conditions, an offer that Manning has declined."

Mendez stated at the time: "The question of my unfettered access to a detainee goes beyond my request to meet with Mr. Manning—it touches on whether I will be able to conduct private and unmonitored interviews with detainees if I were to conduct a country visit to the United States."

As in other questions of international law, such as the execution of foreign nationals and other violations of human rights, the United States government continues to flout investigations and directives of international legal bodies. Having signed into law late last year the National Defense Authorization Act, the Obama administration has formally repudiated the right of habeas corpus and upheld the policy of indefinite military detention without charge.

If Bradley Manning's trial begins as expected on August 3, he will have been held for more than 800

days without being convicted of a crime. The thousands of documents he is accused of passing to WikiLeaks include evidence of civilian deaths at the hands of the US military, as well as US diplomatic dealings propping up corrupt and dictatorial regimes around the world.

While Private Manning has been held in conditions amounting to torture, the US troops and officers responsible for unspeakable crimes against civilians in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere go free, and the top US government officials ultimately responsible for them face no charges.

Meanwhile, Julian Assange remains in Britain fighting extradition to Sweden, where he faces baseless sexual assault accusations. Internal emails recently obtained from the US private intelligence firm Stratfor indicate that the Obama administration has had a secret indictment against Assange for more than a year.

Stratfor's Fred Burton, former deputy chief of the US Department of State's counterterrorism division for the Diplomatic Security Service, wrote in one of these emails, "I look forward to Manning and Assange facing a bajillion-thousand counts [of espionage]."

The Stratfor correspondence makes clear the connection between the likely indictment of Julian Assange and the brutal imprisonment of Bradley Manning. Both are being pursued and persecuted because the WikiLeaks cables have served to expose the criminal machinations of US imperialism and its allies.



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