

As Geneva talks open, US advances trumped-up torture charges against Syria

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With Geneva II international talks on the Syrian war set to open today in Switzerland, the US media yesterday trumpeted unsubstantiated charges of torture and murder against the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad made by international human rights prosecutors.

These charges emerged as Washington's hopes to use the Geneva talks to force through regime-change in Damascus rapidly faded amid rising international tensions. Opposition representatives, who still demand Assad's ouster even as they lose ground to his forces, nearly refused to attend the talks. Assad, pointing to the opposition's close and well-known ties to Al Qaeda, insisted that the purpose of the Geneva talks should only be to fight "terrorism"—that is, the US-backed opposition.

US President Barack Obama and Russian President Vladimir Putin also reportedly discussed the Geneva conference and the upcoming Sochi Olympics in a telephone call yesterday. After suicide bombings in the Russian city of Volgograd last month, Moscow fears that Chechen Islamist terrorists, many of whom have fought with the US-backed opposition in Syria, will attack the Olympics.

Plans for the Geneva talks descended into a fiasco this week when Saudi Arabia and the Syrian opposition threatened to boycott them if Iran attended, after which Washington forced the UN to disinvite Iran—Syria's main ally, together with Russia.

Former US Middle East envoy Dennis Ross told the *New York Times* that he did not think the Geneva talks would succeed: "An agenda needs to be agreed, the parties have to want some minimal achievements, the convening co-sponsors have to share some basic goals, and there has to be sufficient leverage on those doing the fighting to permit some compromises to be made. Most of these conditions are lacking."

In this tense setting, elements of the US media and foreign policy establishment are stepping up propaganda

to pressure the Syrian regime and, if need be, provide a pretext for US military action against Damascus. A report, presented to CNN and to the *Guardian* newspaper, claims to have photographs providing "clear evidence" of the Syrian regime's gruesome starvation, torture and murder of 11,000 detainees.

The report and its media presentation are a political fraud and a provocation. Commissioned by London law firm Carter-Ruck at the behest of Qatar, which funds Al Qaeda-linked opposition militias inside Syria, the 31-page report contains no credible evidence of the crimes it is alleging.

It was drafted by three tested operatives of US and British imperialism: two former chief prosecutors for the UN Special Court for Sierra Leone, Desmond de Silva QC and Professor David Crane, and the former lead prosecutor at the International Criminal Tribunal for Yugoslavia, Geoffrey Nice QC.

Crane, a former employee of the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), told the *Guardian*: "Now we have direct evidence of what was happening to people who had disappeared. This is the first provable, direct evidence of what has happened to at least 11,000 human beings who have been tortured and executed and apparently disposed of. This is amazing ... We have the person who took those pictures. That's beyond-reasonable-doubt-type evidence."

In fact, the report has no evidence to back up Crane's claims, or even to prove that the victims were killed by Assad's forces. All the "evidence" cited by the report consists of unseen photographs allegedly located on a flash drive in the possession of an operative codenamed "Caesar," who has been working with Syrian opposition groups since September 2011.

"Caesar" was briefly interviewed in an unnamed Middle East country by the three lawyers on January 12, 13 and 18. The lawyers and the associated forensics team preparing the report were not given access to the full

contents of “Caesar’s” flash drive.

“Caesar” claimed that his flash drive contains 55,000 photographs that the Assad regime asked him to take of the remains of detainees it had tortured and murdered, while “Caesar” was working as a military policeman. There is no credible explanation of why the Assad regime, if it had tortured and murdered 11,000 people, would have asked “Caesar” to carefully document it.

The report states: “Some 5,500 images were examined in total by the forensics team ... Within these 5,500 images, images of a total of 835 deceased persons were evaluated in detail. Of these, 20 percent showed evidence of inflicted trauma and 30 percent were equivocal. Forty-two percent showed emaciation.”

That is to say, the report’s authors have not seen evidence that 11,000 people were killed—a figure for which they are relying entirely on “Caesar” and whatever Middle Eastern regime is hosting him. The figure of 11,000 dead cited in the press has no evidentiary basis at all.

The report does show a dozen of these photographs, including what appear to be several horribly emaciated bodies. However, as “Caesar” and the Carter-Ruck team blurred the date stamps and location information on the photos, it is impossible to know where or by whom they were killed.

While the Assad regime is known to practice torture, having tortured suspects rendered to them by Western intelligence in the so-called “war on terror”—before US imperialism moved to back Al Qaeda against Assad—it is hardly the only possible suspect.

Given that the Islamist opposition runs death squads in areas of Syria they control, carrying out summary mass executions, detaining journalists, and beating prisoners, one could credibly suppose that the report depicted civilians tortured and killed by the US-backed forces.

The report concluded, “Having carefully interviewed ‘Caesar’ and evaluated his evidence in light of the exhibits available to it, the inquiry team found him, for its part, to be a truthful and credible witness. He revealed no signs of being ‘sensational,’ nor did he seem partisan.”

In fact, the entire report—from its funding by the Qatari monarchy, to its ties to US intelligence and its reliance on unseen evidence provided by the Syrian opposition—is “partisan.”

As da Silva admitted to CNN, “Ultimately, the validity of our conclusions turn on the integrity of the people involved.” As the “people involved” in the report are politically tied to attacks by Al Qaeda-linked

Islamists—including last May’s chemical attack by opposition forces in Khan al-Assal, which they tried to blame on Assad’s forces—their findings have no credibility or validity whatsoever.

The US political establishment’s response to these events testifies to its bankruptcy. Ten years ago this year, thousands of pictures emerged documenting torture, rape and murder of detainees in the US-run prisons at Abu Ghraib in US-occupied Iraq. These photographs were buried, a few low-ranking soldiers punished, and the brutalization of Iraqi prisoners and the entire Iraqi people by US imperialism continued.

In contrast, as the US stands now on the verge of launching new wars in the Middle East, totally unsubstantiated reports of photographs of torture are being played up in the media to demonize the latest target of US imperialist aggression.

Over a decade after US imperialism used manipulated intelligence as a pretext to wage an illegal war of aggression against Iraq, government and human rights officials reacted to this latest provocation by ratcheting up tensions with Assad.

US officials told the *Guardian*: “We condemn in strongest possible terms the actions of the regime and call on it to adhere to international obligations with respect to the treatment of prisoners.” They added that the report “tarnished the environment” for the Geneva talks.

Amnesty International Middle East/North Africa demanded to know “why the [UN] Security Council has not yet referred the situation in Syria to the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court.”



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