US forces on global alert ahead of CIA torture report

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9 December 2014

The Pentagon has put tens of thousands of US soldiers on high alert, including Marines and special operations forces, ahead of Tuesday's expected release of a Senate Intelligence Committee report on the torture of prisoners at CIA "black site" prisons around the world.

The Obama White House and the Pentagon confirmed Monday that the higher alert status had been declared in anticipation that the report would provoke popular outrage, particularly in the Middle East, Afghanistan, Pakistan and North Africa, as well as in countries that provided facilities for the CIA torture program, including Poland, Romania, Lithuania and Thailand.

The heightened security measures come amid a frenzied campaign by former CIA and Bush administration officials to attack the report's publication, denouncing it preemptively as a virtual act of treason. Former NSA and CIA director Michael Hayden set the tone with an appearance on the CBS interview program "Face the Nation" Sunday, where he said the report "will be used by our enemies to motivate people to attack Americans and American facilities overseas."

He added that the report would undermine Washington's global influence. "There are countries out there who have cooperated with us on the war on terror at some political risk that are relying on American discretion," he said. "I can't imagine anyone out there going forward in the future who would be willing to do anything that even smacks of political danger."

House Intelligence Committee Chairman Mike Rogers issued an even more apocalyptic warning, declaring flatly that the report "is a terrible idea," adding, "Our own intelligence community has assessed that this will cause violence and deaths."

Islamic fundamentalist groups would seize on the report's revelations, he claimed, although an ample supply of grisly accounts of US torture is already available on the Internet. "They'll use it for their propaganda machine," he told Bloomberg News. "Why are we going to risk the lives of some diplomat, for what? We're going to risk the lives of some intelligence official who had nothing to do with this, for what?"

Both the US Central Command, which includes the Middle East and Afghanistan, and the US Africa Command, which covers the entire African continent, have ordered higher alerts. Nearly 5,000 Marines are likely first responders in the event of attacks on US embassies, consulates or bases. These include crisis-response teams based in Sigonella, Italy, Morón, Spain, and Kuwait, as well as the 2,000-strong Makin Island Amphibious Ready Group, currently on board ships in the Gulf of Aden.

The USS Makin Island, the helicopter and troop carrier that is the flagship of the amphibious group, was the launching pad for Friday's failed raid by Navy SEALs on an alleged Al Qaeda compound in Yemen, in which a US journalist and a South African teacher, both held hostage, were killed.

White House press secretary Josh Earnest revealed Monday that the administration had been informed the Senate report on CIA torture would be released Tuesday. The release of the report "could lead to a greater risk… to US facilities and individuals all around the world," Earnest said. "The administration has taken the prudent steps to ensure that the proper security precautions are in place."

The Senate report is only a partial exposure of the crimes committed by the US intelligence agency. It is limited to the period 2002-2006, during the Bush administration, and is heavily censored by the CIA itself, with pseudonyms substituted for the names of all CIA officers except the top decision-makers, and the pseudonyms themselves blacked out.

The document being released is not the full 6,700-page report compiled by the committee, based on 6 million pages of material examined as part of a three-year probe, but only an executive summary of 500 pages. The report is limited to what the CIA did. It does not review the actions of officials at the Bush White House and Justice Department who gave the green light to torture and concocted pseudo-legal justifications for it.

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Nonetheless, advance comments by Senate Committee members suggest that the report contains new and grisly details of the torture campaign, including extensive waterboarding, physical violence, death threats and other methods characterized by one senator as “medieval.”

In an unusual public commentary, former President George W. Bush was interviewed Sunday on CNN’s “State of the Union” telecast and denounced the Senate report’s criticism of both CIA torture and the subsequent efforts to cover it up. “We’re fortunate to have men and women who work hard at the CIA serving on our behalf,” Bush said. “These are patriots. And whatever the report says, if it diminishes their contributions to our country, it is way off base.”

The *New York Times* reported Monday that a group of former Bush administration officials, including former CIA directors Hayden, George Tenet and John McLaughlin, are spearheading the effort to rebut the report in advance of its release. The newspaper did not note the self-interested character of this campaign: all three men, along with Bush, former Vice President Dick Cheney and other top officials, could face war crimes prosecution if they traveled overseas as a result of the evidence provided by the Senate report, even though the report itself avoids any discussion of White House responsibility for the torture program.

The tone of the pro-torture campaign was expressed most crudely by Cheney, who denounced the Senate report’s contention that the CIA had lied to the Bush White House about the results of its torture interrogations, calling the claim “a crock.” Bush and Cheney are celebrating the torture program rather than attempting to distance themselves from it.

The Bush administration phased out the “black site” program in 2006 after it had been publicly exposed through leaks to the US and European media. Torture undoubtedly continued at other facilities, including Bagram Prison in Afghanistan and US detention camps in Iraq.

After he took office in 2009, Obama signed an executive order banning waterboarding and other methods of interrogation classified as torture under international law, but he blocked any prosecution of Bush administration officials who authorized torture, while the Justice Department ultimately decided not to bring any charges against the torturers themselves.

The Obama administration has stalled publication of the Senate Intelligence Committee report for more than two years, giving the CIA itself the final say over what would be declassified and pressuring Committee Chairman Dianne Feinstein and other Democrats to accept nearly all of the redactions demanded by the agency.

In the final months of talks, White House Chief of Staff Denis McDonough personally intervened to get the bulk of the CIA’s demands accepted. Feinstein also agreed that CIA officials would not face any consequences for their unconstitutional spying on the Senate committee itself, revealed earlier this year.

In March, Feinstein, long a reliable defender of the CIA and apologist for the NSA domestic spying program, went to the well of the Senate to announce that the CIA had hacked into computers being used by Senate Intelligence Committee staffers who were preparing the report. She accused the CIA of violating the US Constitution as well as federal laws.

CIA Director John Brennan at first denied the charge, but later admitted them to be true, even as he charged the Senate staffers with stealing classified material and referred the matter to the Justice Department for possible criminal prosecution. Obama sprang to Brennan’s defense and has continued to adamantly support him. Brennan was promoted by Obama to head the agency after serving as the White House counterterrorism adviser.

In a final effort to delay the report’s publication, Secretary of State John Kerry called Feinstein December 5 and suggested that the report could cause problems for the ongoing US military operations in Iraq and Syria against the Islamic State fundamentalist group, as well as for US hostages held in the region. The Obama administration and the CIA evidently hoped that further delay might halt publication entirely once the Republicans take control of the Senate and the Intelligence Committee in January.

But in a legal proceeding before US District Court in Washington last week, the Justice Department conceded that the report would likely be made public within days. The department has been fighting a Freedom of Information Act request for the release of the report’s executive summary to a consortium of media plaintiffs. On Thursday, the department filed a brief document postponing a motion for summary judgment against the plaintiffs on the grounds that the Senate committee “will publicly release the Executive Summary early next week,” making the issue moot.

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