Physicians' group details psychologists' role in CIA's "extensive system of torture"

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19 December 2014

The organization Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) has published a medical and psychological analysis of the US Intelligence Committee's report on CIA interrogations, concluding that psychologists played "the essential role" in an "extensive system of torture and ill-treatment" run by the CIA under the Bush administration.

Health professionals violated a series of international treaties, laws, and ethical codes including the Geneva Conventions, the UN Convention Against Torture, the War Crimes Act of 1996 and the Nuremburg Code. "In certain instances," the report states, "such as in the crime of unethical research on human subjects, these alleged crimes may rise to the level of crimes against humanity under international law."

Dr. Stephen Soldz, director of the Center for Research, Evaluation, and Program Development at the Boston Graduate School of Psychoanalysis and one of the authors of the report, called for the psychologists and those who directed them to be held accountable for their actions.

"I don't see the political will, and that is hard to change," Soldz told the *World Socialist Web Site*. "There is also always the problem of prosecuting without going to the very top. These events came out of the White House and go up even to the president and his cabinet."

The authors of the report document several instances where medical professionals intentionally inflicted harm on detainees in order to help CIA and military officials interrogate prisoners. Additionally, they provide evidence that some of these professionals played a central role in "conceptualizing and designing strategies for the direct infliction of a combination of physical and psychological harm on detainees."

The PHR report documents the role of psychologists James Mitchell and Bruce Jessen, who were contracted by the CIA and were given the pseudonyms "Grayson Swigert" and "Hammond Dunbar." Mitchell and Jessen are credited with the design of so-called enhanced interrogation techniques (EITs) in 2002. These "techniques" included waterboarding, stress positions, slapping, isolation, sleep deprivation, dietary manipulation, sensory deprivation and overload, and sexual humiliation.

Mitchell and Jessen were formerly employed by the US government's Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape (SERE) program, where they reverse-engineered these techniques in order to train US military personnel to withstand torture and abuse if captured. The pair "personally applied [these techniques] to detainees, conducted psychological evaluations of detainees whom they would torture, trained other interrogators in the use of torture, and recommended what techniques should be employed on which detainees," the report states.

In 2003, Mitchell and Jessen were reportedly receiving compensation of $1,800 per day for their services, an amount four times that of other interrogators. In 2005, the two psychologists formed "Mitchell, Jessen & Associates," which obtained the "sole source contract to provide operational psychologists, debriefers, and security personnel at CIA detention sites," according to the Senate report. For their work in the CIA torture program, the company received $81 million.

Among the torture methods employed by the CIA, the report describes the use of "rectal rehydration," which the CIA has defended as a "well acknowledged medical technique." In defending the torture program, former vice president Dick Cheney has claimed that rectal feeding was "done for medical reasons."

According to the PHR, "rectal hydration is almost never practiced in medicine because there are more effective means, such as oral and intravenous as a first-line form of therapy for rehydration and nutritional support." Further damning the practice, the PHR states:

> The use of rectal hydration and feeding, according to the SSCI summary, was conducted "without medical necessity," meaning oral and/or IV access was possible in these individuals. Moreover, the summary indicates that rectal hydration was used to

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> control and/or punish the detainees.… Insertion of any object into the rectum of an individual without his consent constitutes a form of sexual assault.

The authors of the PHR analysis also address the attempt by the US government to redefine torture in a manner that "precluded recognition and/or liability for the crime." This was done by raising the legal thresholds for levels of physical and mental pain to a level that "essentially rendered the definition meaningless." The authors call this a "legal farce" that "continues to be instrumental in attempts to justify a policy of systematic torture."

There are indications that the torture program was established in part as a system of human experimentation, to test the levels of endurance to barbaric methods while seeking to establish a condition of "learned helplessness" in prisoners.

The prohibition on experimenting on human subjects without consent came out of World War II and the recognition of atrocities committed by the Nazis. The CIA's medical personnel thoroughly documented each procedure in order to make generalizable conclusions about the techniques, which were then used to support the reauthorization of torture activities. The PHR report states:

> …data collection and analysis occurred as a core component of the program. Though performed for the purposes of indemnifying officials from legal liability for torture, this monitoring potentially exposes CIA health professionals and other personnel to the other, equally grave crime of conducting illegal subjects research in violation of the Nuremburg Code.

The "expertise" of medical professionals employed by the CIA was also used to allow torture to continue, even when detainees exhibited serious medical conditions. The Senate report describes an instance where a detainee was shackled in the standing position for 54 hours as part of sleep deprivation, which caused swelling in his legs. The CIA medical providers then utilized blood thinner and ace bandages in order to quell the swelling after which his sleep deprivation was extended to 78 hours.

In their report, the PHR connects these crimes to the oversight of the Bush administration and criticizes the Obama administration for failing to investigate and prosecute those responsible for this torture. Their analysis concludes by stating that "there is no exception to the prohibition on torture under international law, or to the obligation on all governments to prosecute it. Governments will always claim there are exceptional circumstances that justify the use of torture, and—as the SSCI summary reveals—these claims will be built on lies."

Speaking to the WSWS, Dr. Soldz explained that the failure to hold anyone accountable for torture opened the door for it to be officially resumed in the future. "The fact that President Obama has allegedly abandoned these practices," Soldz stated, "will not necessarily be binding in the future. We've seen many of these orders that have been dropped. While torture is illegal by international law and by US domestic law, there is little disincentive for perpetrators to repeat these violations when no one is held to account."

Indeed, in his defense of the CIA, Obama's CIA director, John Brennan, said last week that the resumption of the "enhanced interrogation program" will be left to "the policy makers in future times when there is going to be the need to be able to ensure that this country stays safe if we face a similar type of crisis" as the September 11 attacks.

"My colleagues have been pursuing this since 2006 when the first names [of psychologists involved in torture] came out and went public," Soldz said. "Unfortunately this has been to no avail," and the physicians involved have not faced any punishment, even professionally. "The American Psychological Association kept one case open from 2006 until December of 2013 but never submitted it to the ethics committee."

Speaking of the impact on the medical profession, Soldz said: "Just as the allegiance between medicine and drug companies takes away public trust, so does this entanglement between psychologists and military intelligence lead to an erosion of confidence. This hurts our ability to get medical care to people who need it."

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