Obama administration continues suppression of torture photos

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On Friday, the Department of Defense released 198 out of around 2,000 photos showing torture and other war crimes perpetrated by US military forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. The photos were released as a result of 12 years of litigation under the Freedom of Information Act by the American Civil Liberties Union.

These 198 photographs were doubtless cherry-picked by the Obama administration so that they constitute the least incriminating 10 percent of the photographs that were originally withheld. The most incriminating photographs still remain among the approximately 1,800 or more that are being suppressed by the Obama administration.

"What the photos that the government has suppressed would show is that abuse was so widespread that it could only have resulted from policy or a climate calculated to foster abuse," wrote ACLU attorney Alex Abdo in a statement on Friday. "That is why the government must release all of the photos and why today's selective disclosure is so troubling."

Even so, the 198 photographs provide a glimpse into the brutal hellholes established as part of the US "counterinsurgency operations" in Iraq and Afghanistan. The photographs show bruised and bloody body parts; young men blindfolded, hooded, and shackled; and other evidence of torture.

The photographs show close-ups of a bruised knee or arm or foot, an injured shoulder, a discolored neck. Some photographs have black bars across the faces of the victims. Some of the photos are in color, while others are in grainy black-and-white. (A well-known trick, used by American police departments when compelled to release evidence, is to deliberately render photographs as blurry as possible so as to prevent anything from being understood from them.)

Some of the photos are available on the ACLU's website, along with a searchable database of the 6,000 documents obtained so far.

However, the context of the photographs is often missing, and much more information still needs to come to light. "From what we can infer from the descriptions," the ACLU wrote in a statement, "we know that the most damning evidence of government abuse remains hidden from the public."

According to the ACLU, the photos that are being withheld include "the case of a 73-year-old Iraqi woman detained and allegedly sexually abused and assaulted by U.S. soldiers. .. the soldiers forced her to 'crawl around on all-fours as a large man rode on her,' striking her with a stick and calling her an animal. Other pictures depict an Iraqi teenager bound and standing in the headlights of a truck immediately after his mock execution staged by U.S. soldiers. Another shows the body of Muhamad Husain Kadir, an Iraqi farmer, shot dead at point-blank range by an American soldier while handcuffed."

For the past 12 years, the Bush and Obama administrations have taken identical positions with respect to these photos, and they have vigorously stonewalled all attempts to secure their release. The Abu Ghraib photos, the most infamous evidence of torture, were leaked while the Bush administration was in the process of appealing in court to keep them confidential.

The Abu Ghraib photos depicted a systemic and deranged pattern of rape, torture, and murder at a US military prison in Iraq following the 2003 invasion. The photos showed US torturers cutting the faces of live prisoners with surgical tools, dragging naked prisoners around on leashes, shackling prisoners in positions reminiscent of the medieval Inquisition and other horrific acts that provoked international revulsion. A handful of the involved soldiers were eventually put on trial, but the senior Bush administration officials behind the program have been shielded from prosecution by the Obama administration.

Shortly after taking office in 2009, President Obama

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promised to release torture photos that had been suppressed by the Bush administration, but he quickly reversed himself and repudiated his promise. Obama stated that releasing the photos would "inflame anti-American opinion" and "put our troops in greater danger."

Nobody has been prosecuted in the wake of the Central Intelligence Agency torture scandal, which culminated in a December 2014 report by the Senate Intelligence Committee. The executive summary of that report, which is the only portion made public so far, exposed not only a systematic practice of torture, but a longstanding and ongoing conspiracy to cover up those crimes and shield the perpetrators from accountability.

Nor was anyone prosecuted after the CIA broke into Senate staffers' computers during the investigation to delete incriminating files. To this day, the Obama administration is working to suppress the full Senate report on CIA torture and to prevent its release.

The position of the Bush and Obama administrations is that anything that embarrasses the United States military or any of its leaders must be censored on "national security" grounds because such material can be used to incite violence against America. According to this legal argument—which would be perfectly consistent with a police-state dictatorship—the more criminal the actions of agents of the US government, the more reason to keep those actions secret. Another consequence of this argument is that anyone who exposes US government criminality is automatically guilty of treason and "aiding the enemy," since any such exposures could hypothetically be used by Al Qaeda to help recruit terrorists.

These same legal arguments were expressly rejected by American courts during the litigation over the release of the Pentagon Papers in 1971. In court, the Nixon administration demanded a restraining order to stop publication of the papers, claiming that their publication would endanger the lives of US troops and harm national security. The *New York Times* took the position that these vague and generalized allegations of future harm were insufficient to support censorship, and that the government must demonstrate (and had not demonstrated) an immediate, objective danger to specific targets.

The fact that torturers and major war criminals remain at large exposes the entire American political establishment, including both Democrats and Republicans, the courts and the official media.

Like every colonial-imperialist power before it, America uses terror and murder to intimidate the population of occupied countries into submission. From Bernie Sanders to Donald Trump, all of the current presidential contenders are unanimous in their silence with respect to the issue of prosecuting American war criminals. The media, for its part, never raises the issue, except to facilitate rabid calls for more torture by some of the Republican candidates.

Indeed, if Bernie Sanders were to call for the prosecution of war criminals, it would be necessary for him to call for the arrest of the current president, Barack Obama, a fellow Democrat. It would also require him to indict his fellow Democratic contender for the White House, Hilary Clinton. Further, it would result in the exposure of war crimes perpetrated in places like Afghanistan, where Sanders supported and is politically responsible for the US invasion. Finally, it would imply the prosecution of senior military and intelligence figures who otherwise would serve in the Sanders administration, should he take office in January 2017.

To bring America's torturers and war criminals to justice, it is necessary for the working class to mobilize internationally, independent of all of the entire bourgeois political milieu and in opposition to capitalism, the driving force behind imperialist war and war crimes.

The photos released on Friday constitute an additional 198 exhibits that should be admitted into evidence in a future war crimes trial of Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, John Brennan, Leon Panetta, Robert Gates, James Clapper, John Ashcroft, John Kerry and others. The defendants in such a trial would not only include the direct perpetrators, but also all those who made themselves accomplices by attempting to cover up and conceal the underlying crimes. To these 198 exhibits will be added the remaining 1,800 photos that are still being withheld by the Obama administration.

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