

Human Rights Watch

Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2005/12/19/us-operated-secret-dark-prison-kabul>

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(New York) Accounts from detainees at Guantamo reveal that the United States as recently as last year operated a secret prison in Afghanistan where detainees were subjected to torture and other mistreatment, Human Rights Watch said today.

Eight detainees now held at Guantamo described to their attorneys how they were held at a facility near Kabul at various times between 2002 and 2004. The detainees, who called the facility the dark prison or prison of darkness, said they were chained to walls, deprived of food and drinking water, and kept in total darkness with loud rap, heavy metal music, or other sounds blared for weeks at a time.

The detainees offer consistent accounts about the facility, saying that U.S. and Afghan guards were not in uniform and that U.S. interrogators did not wear military attire, which suggests that the prison may have been operated by personnel from the Central Intelligence Agency.

The detainees said U.S. interrogators slapped or punched them during interrogations. They described being held in complete darkness for weeks on end, shackled to rings bolted into the walls of their cells, with loud music or other sounds played continuously. Some detainees said they were shackled in a manner that made it impossible to lie down or sleep, with restraints that caused their hands and wrists to swell up or bruise. The detainees said they were deprived of food for days at a time, and given only filthy water to drink.

The detainees also said that they were held incommunicado and never visited by representatives of the International Committee of the Red Cross or other independent officials.

The U.S. government must shed some light on Kabuls dark prison, said John Sifton, terrorism and counterterrorism researcher at Human Rights Watch. No one, no matter their alleged crime, should be held in secret prisons or subjected to torture.

The detainees allegations were communicated to Human Rights Watch by their attorneys and are contained in attorneys contemporaneous notes. Human Rights Watch was unable to interview the detainees directly, since the United States has not allowed human rights organizations to visit detainees at Guantamo or other detention sites abroad. However, Human Rights Watch believes that the detainees allegations are sufficiently credible to warrant an official investigation. The detainees are of different nationalities and have different attorneys. None claimed to have been detained at the secret facility for more than six weeks at a time, and did not otherwise make extraordinary claims.

Most of the detainees said they were arrested in other countries in Asia and the Middle East, and then flown to Afghanistan. Detainees who arrived by airplane said they were driven about five minutes from a landing field to the prison. Afghan guards told some of them that the facility was located near Kabul. Some detainees who were kept at the facility were transferred at various times to and from another secret facility near Kabul. The detainees said they were later transferred to the main U.S. military detention facility near Bagram, where many other Guantamo detainees say they were initially held.

Human Rights Watch said that the dark prison may have been closed after several detainees were transferred to the Bagram facility in late 2004.

M.Z., a detainee arrested in another country in 2002 (name and identifying details withheld at his attorneys request), said he was held at the prison of darkness for about four weeks. He says he was sent to an underground place, very dark where there was loud music playing continuously. He said he was held in solitary confinement, where it was pitch black... no light. M.Z. said that when he was interrogated he was taken to a room with a strobe light, and shackled to a ring on the floor. During the interrogations, he says, an interrogator threatened him with rape.

Benyam Mohammad, an Ethiopian-born Guantamo detainee who grew up in Britain, said he was held at the dark prison in 2004 and described his experience to his attorney in English:

It was pitch black no lights on in the rooms for most of the time.... They hung me up. I was allowed a few hours of sleep on the second day, then hung up again, this time for two days. My legs had swollen. My wrists and hands had gone numb.... There was loud music, [Eminems] Slim Shady and Dr. Dre for 20 days.... [Then] they changed the sounds to horrible ghost laughter and Halloween sounds. [At one point, I was] chained to the rails for a fortnight.... The CIA worked on people, including me, day and night.... Plenty lost their minds. I could hear people knocking their heads against the walls and the doors, screaming their heads off.

J.K., another detainee (name withheld at attorneys request), also alleged that he had been held in the dark, shackled to the wall and subjected to weeks of sleep deprivation and constant loud music and noise, as well as being beaten during interrogations. People were screaming in pain and crying all the time, he told his attorney.

Abd al-Salam Ali al-Hila, a Yemeni whose arrest and transfer to Afghanistan was previously documented by Human Rights Watch [Guantanamo: New Reverse Rendition Case](#), said he was kept at the dark prison at various times in 2003. He told his lawyers he had been chained to the wall, kept in almost constant darkness, and subjected to sleep deprivation and constant noise.

Similarly, attorneys for Hassin Bin Attash, Jamil el Banna and Bisher al Rawi, three other detainees who said they were previously held at the dark prison, said their clients made allegations about constant darkness, shackling, sleep deprivation, inadequate food and water, and beatings during interrogations. One other detainee provided similar information through his attorney, who requested that the clients name and nationality be kept confidential.

On November 18, ABC News [reported](#) that several CIA officials told ABC that the CIA had operated a secret facility in Kabul, and voiced concerns about interrogations there. The CIA officials, who requested anonymity from ABC, said that CIA officials authorized six techniques for use against detainees with high-level intelligence value, including long-term sleep deprivation, exposure to cold for more than 40 hours, and waterboarding, in which interrogators poured water over the detainees face until he believed he would suffocate or drown. The officials told ABC that the CIA had authorized these techniques in March 2002 and that they were used at the Kabul facility and elsewhere.

The accounts given by the Guantanamo detainees about the Kabul facility are also consistent with stories told by four detainees, who in July escaped from U.S. military custody at Bagram, on a videotape obtained by ABC News and Al-Arabiya. On the videotape, the detainees said they were held at the dark prison before being sent to Bagram, and describe being subjected to loud music and total darkness, as well as physical abuse.

Human Rights Watch has previously identified 26 disappeared persons believed to be held in secret facilities operated or used by the U.S. A disappearance is an unlawful detention in which the detaining authorities deny holding the person or refuse to disclose his or her whereabouts. Human Rights Watch said today that the U.S. may have used the facility near Kabul to hold disappeared detainees at various times.

Human Rights Watch said that the alleged torture and other mistreatment of detainees, if proven, would amount to serious violations of U.S. criminal law, such as the War Crimes Act and the Anti-Torture Statute, as well as the laws of Afghanistan. The mistreatment of detainees also violates the Convention against Torture and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, both of which the United States has ratified, and the laws of war. ([Summary of statutes](#))

Human Rights Watch has long called for a special prosecutor to investigate alleged mistreatment of detainees in U.S. detention facilities abroad.

Were not talking about torture in the abstract, but the real thing, said Sifton. U.S. personnel and officials may be criminally liable, and a special prosecutor is needed to investigate.

Human Rights Watch called on the United States to move disappeared persons into known detention facilities, articulate the legal basis under which detainees are held, and allow access to all detainees by independent monitors.

Its time for the Bush administration to shut the secret prisons and stop holding people illegally, said Sifton.

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