

Human Rights Watch

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

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We now know that the only truly exceptional aspect of the horrors at Abu Ghraib was that they were photographed. Around the world, in recognised and secret detention centres, the US is brutalising Muslim suspects in the name of the war on terror. This pattern of abuse did not result from the acts of a few disgraceful individuals. It resulted from decisions made by US officials to cast the rules aside.

When the pictures first stunned the world, President George W Bush spoke of disgraceful conduct by a few troops who dishonoured our country.

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At Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, where about 500 men remain in detention, released captives describe the use of stress positions and prolonged exposure to extremes of heat and cold.

In Afghanistan, where at least nine prisoners have died in US custody, detainees have been beaten severely by guards and interrogators, deprived of sleep and exposed to extreme cold.

At least 26 al-Qaeda suspects have disappeared. The CIA is holding them in undisclosed locations, with no notification to their families, no access to the Red Cross and no oversight of their treatment, effectively placing them beyond the protection of the law.

Suspects have been routinely rendered to countries where torture is routine. For example, Maher Arar, a Canadian in transit in New York, was detained without charge and sent to Syria. On his release 10 months later, he described repeated torture.

This pattern of abuse did not result from the acts of a few disgraceful individuals. It resulted from decisions made by US officials to cast the rules aside. This month it was revealed that Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld personally oversaw the interrogations of Guantanamo detainee Mohammad al-Qahtani, who was deprived of sleep, forced into stress positions and subjected to sexual and other humiliation.

It is now evident that the abuse of detainees has been a central part of the US strategy for interrogating terrorist suspects. Attorney General Alberto Gonzales said last January that the USs policy permitted the use of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment against non-Americans held outside the US.

The US Congress in January enacted provisions clarifying that US officials are prohibited from engaging in or authorizing cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment of detainees in US custody anywhere in the world. Bushs signing statement says that he will interpret the restrictions in the context of his broader constitutional powers as commander-in-chief. Everyone understands that this will mean that the brutality will continue.

The acceptance of interrogation methods antithetical to a democracy is betraying the USs identity as a nation of law. It opens the way for governments from Uzbekistan to Zimbabwe to use US actions to justify their own practices. If the US is to wipe away the stain of Abu Ghraib, it needs to prosecute those at the top who ordered or condoned torture and repudiate the mistreatment of detainees.

Reed Brody is special counsel at Human Rights Watch and the author of reports on detainee abuse by the US

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