

Equal Justice Initiative

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://eji.org/news/america-exporting-abusive-prison-system-across-globe/>

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For nearly two decades, a little-known State Department program has been building prisons in foreign countries and training foreign officials to run them like American correctional facilities.

BuzzFeed News [reports](#) that the State Department's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) has trained about 50,000 correctional officers from five continents in the past decade, and those officers have trained another 60,000. The program, which began in Latin America during the early 2000s, is currently involved in the prison systems of 38 countries.

Starting in 2000, the United States spent \$140 million to overhaul Colombia's justice system as part of the war on drugs. Six new prisons were built between 2000 and 2003 based on blueprints from a federal prison in Florida. Sixteen more prisons were built over the next dozen years, increasing capacity by 70 percent, and guards were trained using American instruction manuals translated into Spanish. Colombia hired Rudy Giuliani as a consultant and adopted his broken windows policy, which includes harsh punishment for minor offenses.

Last year, the minister of justice declared a [state of emergency](#) in Colombia's prisons due to overcrowding and inhumane conditions. BuzzFeed reports that U.S.-trained Colombian prison officers have been accused of human rights abuses; overcrowding has increased; and the widespread use of solitary confinement has been criticized by civil rights groups.

The INL nonetheless considers its intervention in Colombia to be a success, and is rapidly expanding its efforts in the Middle East and West Africa, where it is focused on counterterrorism. Tens of millions of American taxpayer dollars have been wasted on unfinished and shoddy prison construction projects in Iraq and Afghanistan since the early 2000s. After the INL trained 7,000 Afghan correctional officers, who in turn trained nearly all of the country's prison guards, the United Nations found that hundreds of detainees in Afghanistan had been tortured and mistreated by prison guards.

Prison officials from several West African countries are among the latest targets of the INL's policy tourism, a common tactic of the State Department that seeks to impress foreign officials by showing off only the best American facilities. The INL is currently building a high-security prison in the world's least-developed nation, Niger, that is custom designed to counter extremism. In 2013, Boko Haram, deemed the world's deadliest militant group, attacked the central prison in Niger's capital and released 22 prisoners. Fueled in part by recruits from within Niger's prisons, Boko Haram has now overwhelmed the government's ability to protect civilians.

The scale of this effort to export American-style incarceration is troubling in light of the violence, abuse, overcrowding, and [inhumane conditions](#) that characterize many prisons in the United States, where more than 2.2 million people are incarcerated. America has the [world's highest incarceration rate](#), and a horrendous track record not only at home, but also overseas. American-run prisons in Iraq, including the detention center where ISIS's leaders first organized, have [strengthened](#) the insurgency they were supposed to weaken, and U.S. prisons from Guantanamo to Abu Ghraib have been the site of shocking torture and abuses.

A State Department program builds prisons in foreign countries and trains officials to run them like American prisons.

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