

U.S.: Soldiers Tell of Detainee Abuse in Iraq

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Abusive Techniques Were Authorized, Soldiers' Complaints Ignored

(New York, July 23, 2006) - Torture and other abuses against detainees in U.S. custody in Iraq were authorized and routine, even after the 2004 Abu Ghraib scandal, according to new accounts from soldiers in a Human Rights Watch report released today. The new report, containing first-hand accounts by U.S. military personnel interviewed by Human Rights Watch, details detainee abuses at an off-limits facility at Baghdad airport and at other detention centers throughout Iraq.

These accounts rebut U.S. government claims that torture and abuse in Iraq was unauthorized and exceptional - on the contrary, it was condoned and commonly used.

John Sifton, senior researcher on terrorism and counterterrorism at Human Rights Watch

In the 53-page report, "No Blood, No Foul: Soldiers' Accounts of Detainee Abuse in Iraq," soldiers describe how detainees were routinely subjected to severe beatings, painful stress positions, severe sleep deprivation, and exposure to extreme cold and hot temperatures. The accounts come from interviews conducted by Human Rights Watch, supplemented by memoranda and sworn statements contained in declassified documents.

"Soldiers were told that the Geneva Conventions did not apply, and that interrogators could use abusive techniques to get detainees to talk," said John Sifton, the author of the report and the senior researcher on terrorism and counterterrorism at Human Rights Watch. "These accounts rebut U.S. government claims that torture and abuse in Iraq was unauthorized and exceptional - on the contrary, it was condoned and commonly used."

The accounts reveal that detainee abuse was an established and apparently authorized part of the detention and interrogation processes in Iraq for much of 2003-2005. They also suggest that soldiers who sought to report abuse were rebuffed or ignored.

The Human Rights Watch report comes at a time when Bush administration officials and congressional leaders are hotly debating the applicability of the Geneva Conventions to detainee treatment. The report provides vivid demonstration of the abuses that result when these basic international standards are ignored.

Some of the most serious abuses detailed in the report concern a special task force, which was called at various times Task Force 20, Task Force 121, Task Force 6-26, and Task Force 145, and was stationed at an off-limits detention center at the Baghdad airport, called Camp Nama.

The report also describes serious abuses at a facility near Mosul airport, and at a base near al-Qaim, on the Syrian border.

According to soldiers' accounts, detainees at Camp Nama were - in violation of international law - not registered with the International Committee of the Red Cross. They were regularly stripped naked and subjected to beatings, forced exercises, severe sleep deprivation and various forms of

degrading and humiliating treatment.

An interrogator who served at Camp Nama told Human Rights Watch that the leadership of his interrogation unit encouraged abuse. "[P]eople wanted to go, go, go harsh on everybody," he said. "They thought that was their job and that's what they needed to do, and do it every time."

The accounts given by soldiers reveal that many abusive techniques were authorized by the military chain of command. An interrogator posted at a facility near Mosul in 2004 told Human Rights Watch of a case in which the officer in charge of his interrogation unit told him and other interrogators to use abusive techniques on a set of detainees. The officer reportedly said, "Look, this is what we are gonna do - we're gonna keep them up all night long, we're gonna keep them on their knees and we're not gonna let them sleep."

According to the interrogator:

He [the MI officer] was very specific about it. He didn't say, 'I want you guys to go nuts on these guys,' but he was very specific about what he wanted . . . Later, we had a few dogs on these guys too [i.e., used dogs to intimidate the detainees], and all the whole thing . . . [The MI officer] said, you know, 'I've got these dog handlers, these MPs, they are going to come in and you're gonna use them in the interrogation.' . . . [W]e were making these guys do MPT [exercise], which were pretty rough on them. And the stretch positions were pretty rough on them too . . . you know, like kneeling in the gravel, walking on your knees in the gravel . . . having them stand with outstretched arms with water bottles in [their] hands for extended periods of time. Crawling through the gravel. And the guards in the prison were helping with this.

The interrogator stationed at Camp Nama, mentioned above, said the commander of the interrogation unit there had to authorize the use of the abuse techniques, but that the authorizations were so common that interrogators used a template to fill out authorization forms:

There was an authorization template on a computer, a sheet that you would print out, or actually just type it in. And it was a checklist . . . you would just check what you want to use off, and if you planned on using a harsh interrogation, you'd just get it signed off. I never saw a sheet that wasn't signed. It would be signed off by the commander, whoever that was . . . He would sign off on that every time it was done.

In several instances described in the report, detainee abuse was apparently reported to military leadership in Baghdad and Washington, but little or no action was taken to stop it. For instance, an investigation into a detention facility at Mosul airport in early 2004, initiated after a detainee there had his jaw broken, revealed that detainees at Mosul were regularly subjected to abuse. However, no action was taken to punish wrongdoers, and an interrogator stationed there described serious abuse continuing through 2004. A detainee died while undergoing interrogation at the facility in December 2003; another died in April 2004.

Abuses also continued at Camp Nama through much of 2004, even after various military officials registered complaints about abuse at the facility. Col. Stuart A. Herrington, a retired military intelligence officer, was brought to Iraq to assess intelligence gathering. He informed Gen. Barbara Fast, the chief of military intelligence in Iraq, in a memorandum that Task Force 121 was abusing detainees and not registering them either in the military's detention records or with the International Committee of the Red Cross.

Herrington concluded, "It seems clear that TF 121 needs to be reined in with respect to its treatment of detainees." Despite this warning, abuses by the task force continued.

Human Rights Watch said that the new report shows how soldiers who felt abusive practices were wrong or illegal faced significant obstacles at every turn when they attempted to report or expose the abuses. For example, an MP guard at the facility near al-Qaim, who complained to an officer about beatings and other abuse he witnessed, was told, "You need to go ahead and drop this, sergeant."

The guard told Human Rights Watch, "It was repeatedly emphasized to me that this was not a wise course of action to pursue . . . 'You don't want to take this inquiry anywhere else,' kind of thing. 'You should definitely drop this; this is not something you wanna do to yourself.'"

In another instance, after an interrogator complained about abuse at a facility near the Baghdad airport, commanders asked military lawyers to conduct a Power Point presentation for interrogators. During the presentation, the lawyers instructed the interrogators, erroneously, that the Geneva Conventions did not apply to the detainees at their facility, and that the techniques they were using were acceptable.

"They told us that they're enemy combatants, they're not POWs, and so we can do all this stuff to them and so forth," the interrogator said.

Human Rights Watch has previously condemned Iraqi insurgent groups for routinely violating international humanitarian law, carrying out abductions and attacks against civilians and humanitarian aid workers, and detonating hundreds of bombs in bazaars, mosques and other civilian areas. Human Rights Watch has stated that those responsible for violations, including the leaders of these groups, should, if captured, be investigated and prosecuted for violations of Iraqi law and the laws of war.

"The crimes of insurgents are no excuse," said Sifton. "Abuses by one side in a conflict, no matter how vile, do not justify violations by the other side. This is a fundamental principle of the laws of war."

Human Rights Watch said that the report showed that criminal investigations of abuses need to follow the military chain of command, rather than focusing on low-level soldiers. To date, not a single military intelligence officer has been court-martialed in connection with abuse allegations in Iraq. Human Rights Watch is unaware of any criminal investigations into wrongdoing by officers overseeing interrogations and detention operations in Iraq.

Human Rights Watch called on the U.S. Congress to appoint an independent, bipartisan commission to investigate the true scope of detainee abuse in Iraq, the complicity of higher-level officials, and the systemic flaws that make it difficult for soldiers to report abuses they witness. Human Rights Watch also called on the president to appoint an independent prosecutor to investigate and prosecute the perpetrators of abuse, including the military and civilian leaders who authorized or condoned abuse.

"It is now clear that leaders were responsible for abuses that occurred in Iraq," Sifton said. "It's time for them to be held accountable."

P.S.

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