

## Torture by U.S. Was Widespread

By Sherwood Ross

Global Research, July 30, 2010

Although U.S. officials have attributed the torture of Muslim prisoners in their custody to a handful of maverick guards, in fact such criminal acts were widely perpetrated and systemic, likely involving large numbers of military personnel, a book by a survivor suggests. Additionally, guards were responsible for countless acts of murder, including death by crucifixion, lynching, poisoning, snakebite, withholding of medicines, starvation, and bludgeoning of innocent victims. And the murders committed by U.S. troops numbered at least in the hundreds, according to reliable sources.

As well, Pentagon architects designed prisons that were sadistic torture chambers in themselves, barely six feet high and seven feet wide, in which human beings were kept for months or years at a time---spaces which, one prisoner noted, are smaller than the legal requirements in Germany for doghouses. Architects who knowingly designed these hellholes may have also committed crimes against humanity.

After the photographs of sadism at Iraq's Abu Ghraib in May, 2004, shocked the world, President Bush called the revelations "a stain on our country's honor and our country's reputation." He told visiting King Abdullah of Jordan in the Oval Office that "I was sorry for the humiliation suffered by the Iraqi prisoners, and the humiliation suffered by their families." Bush told The Washington Post, "I told him (Abdullah) I was equally sorry that people who have been seeing those pictures didn't understand the true nature and heart of America." A year later, Lyndie England and 10 others from the 372nd Military Police Company were convicted of torture at Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad, Iraq, yet the events of that prison were likely duplicated everywhere across the spectrum of Pentagon and CIA detention camps acting on orders from the Bush White House.

Although President Bush made the Abu Ghraib revelations sound like nothing worse than "humiliation" in fact, the Abu Ghraib photos gave the world a glimpse into far greater crimes of every sordid type---and reports compiled from other sources indicated that to be captured by the Americans was a veritable descent into hell.

While the President's words sounded as if they came from an innocent bystander, this was the same man who claimed two years earlier the Geneva Conventions did not apply in the countries the U.S. had invaded; they were uttered by the man who, with his Vice President Dick Cheney, is primarily responsible for the entire venomous persecution of thousands of innocent men, women, and even children. While a handful of guards such as Ms. England---notorious for her "thumbs up" photo observing a human pyramid of naked prisoners, were convicted and jailed---the many other hundreds or thousands of military guards, interrogators, and doctors and dentists also involved in the widespread tortures have never been prosecuted for their crimes.

It should be kept in mind that no impartial legal system was in place to defend the rights of the accused, so that their torturers could break laws without fear of reprisal. As Jane Mayer wrote in "The Dark Side"(Anchor), "Seven years after the attacks of September 11, not a single terror suspect held outside of the U.S. criminal court system has been tried. Of the 759 detainees acknowledged to have been held in Guantanamo, approximately 340 remained there, only a handful of whom had been charged. Among these, not a single 'enemy combatant' had yet had the opportunity to cross-examine the government or see the evidence on which he was being held. Thus, since none had been brought to trial, all the tortures inflicted were on captives who must be presumed innocent. One book, by a man who survived the nightmare of captivity where so many others perished, gives the lie to the notion that abuses were carried out by a few vicious guards. Everywhere he went he was beaten and he saw other prisoners also beaten by many different teams of sadistic guards. The conviction of Ms. England and her companions, therefore, does not begin to serve the cause of justice.

According to Murat Kurnaz, a 19-year-old Turkish citizen raised in Germany and falsely defamed as "the German Taliban," tortured at the several prisons in which he was held was frequent, commonplace, and committed by many guards. In his book, "Five Years of My Life: An Innocent Man in Guantanamo"(Palgrave Macmillan), beatings began in 2001 on the flight from Pakistan (where he was pulled off a public bus and sold by Pakistani police for \$3,000) to his first imprisonment in Afghanistan. "I couldn't see how many soldiers there were, but to judge from the confusion of voices it must have been a lot. They went from one

prisoner to the next, hitting us with their fists, their billy clubs, and the butts of their rifles." This was done to men that were manacled to the floor of the plane. "It was as cold as a refrigerator; I was sitting on bare metal and icy air was coming from a vent or a fan. I tried to go to sleep, but they kept hitting me and waking me...they never tired of beating us, laughing all the while."

On another occasion, Kurnaz counted seven guards who were beating a prisoner with the butts of their rifles and kicking him with their boots until he died. At one point, Kurnaz was hung by chains with his arms behind his back for five days. "Today I know that a lot of inmates died from treatment like this." When he was finally taken down and needed water "they'd just pour the water over my head and laugh." The guards even tortured a blind man who was older than 90 "the same way the rest of us were," Kurnaz wrote.

At Camp X-Ray, Guantanamo, Cuba, Kurnaz said, "During the day, we had to remain seated and at night we had to lie down. If you lay down during the day you were punished...We weren't allowed to talk. We weren't to speak to or look at the guards. We weren't allowed to draw in the sand or whistle or sing or smile. Every time I unknowingly broke a rule, or because they had just invented a new one...an IRF (Immediate Reaction Force) team would come and beat me." Once when he was weak from a hunger strike, Kurnaz wrote, "I was beaten on a stretcher." During his earlier imprisonment at Kandahar, Pakistan, Kurnaz writes, "There were weaker, older men in the pen. Men with broken feet, men whose legs and arms were fractured or had turned blue, red, or yellow from pus. There were prisoners with broken jaws, fingers and noses, and with terribly swollen faces like mine." Not only were the wounds of such men ignored by guards but complicit doctors would examine him and other prisoners during tortures and advise guards as to how much more they could stand before they died. On one occasion, he saw guards beating a prisoner with no legs.

Still worse, Kurnaz said doctors participated in the tortures. A dentist asked to pull out a prisoner's rotten tooth pulled out all his healthy ones as well. Another prisoner who went to the doctor to treat one finger with severe frostbite had all his other fingers amputated. "I saw open wounds that weren't treated. A lot of people had been beaten so often they had broken legs, arms and feet. The fractures, too, remained untreated," Kurnaz wrote. "I never saw anyone in a cast." Prisoners were deliberately weakened by starvation diets. Meals at Guantanamo consisted of "three spoonfuls of rice, a slice of dry bread, and a plastic spoon. That was it." Sometimes a loaf of bread was tossed over a fence into their compound.

Prisoners who should have been in hospital beds instead were confined to cells purposefully designed to torture them. Kurnaz described his experience this way: "Those cells were like ovens. The sun beat down on the metal roof at noon and directly on the sides of the cage in the mornings and afternoons. All told, I think I spent roughly a year alone in absolute darkness, either in a cooler or an oven, with little food, and once I spent three months straight in solitary confinement." Prisoners could be put in solitary confinement for the tiniest infractions of the most ridiculous rules, such as not folding a blanket properly. "I was always being punished and humiliated, regardless of what I did," Kurnaz said. Once, he was put in solitary for ten days for feeding breadcrumbs to an iguana that had crawled into his cage.

Besides regular beatings from IRF, who commonly entered cells with clubs swinging, Kurnaz received excruciating electroshocks to his feet and was waterboarded in a 20-inch diameter plastic bucket filled with water. He describes the experience as follows: "Someone grabbed me by the hair. The soldiers seized my arms and pushed my head underwater. ...Drowning is a horrible way to die. They pulled my head back up. "Do you like it? You want more?" When my head was back underwater, I felt a blow to my stomach.... "Where is Osama? "Who are you?" I tried to speak but I couldn't. I swallowed some water....It became harder and harder to breath, the more they hit me in the stomach and pushed my head underwater. I felt my heart racing. They didn't let up...I imagined myself screaming underwater...I would have told them everything. But what was I supposed to tell them?" It should be noted that U.S. and German authorities had decided as early as 2002 that Kurnaz was innocent---that he really was a student of the Koran in Pakistan when he had been seized by bounty hunters and sold to the Americans as a "terrorist." Yet they continued the tortures for years knowing all along of his innocence.

On yet other occasions, Kurnaz, like so many other prisoners, was hung from chains backwards so that "it felt as though my shoulders were going to break. "I was hoisted up until my feet no longer touched the ground....After a while, the cuffs seemed like they were cutting my wrists down to the bone. My shoulders felt like someone was trying to pull my arms out of their sockets...When they hung me up backwards, it felt as though my shoulders were going to break...I was strung up for five days...Three times a day soldiers came in and let me down (and) a doctor examined me and took my pulse. 'Okay,' he said. The soldiers hoisted me back up. I lost all feeling in my arms and hands. I still felt pain in other parts of my body, like in my chest around my heart..." A short distance away Kurnaz could see another man hanging from chains--dead.

To compound the inmates' misery, Guantanamo guards would trample an inmate's Koran, the sacred book of the Muslims. While U.S. authorities denied that Korans had been thrown in toilets, those denials are worth little considering that when the evening call to prayer was sounded, Kurnez said, the caller's voice "was drowned out by loud music. It was the American national anthem." One boorish guard specialized in kicking at prisoners' cell doors when they attempted to pray.

When Kurnaz was transferred within the Guantanamo prison system to "Camp 1" he was put in a maximum security cage inside a giant container with metal walls. "Although the cage was no smaller than the one in Camp X-Ray, the bunk reduced the amount of free space to around three-and-a-half feet by three-and-a-half feet. At the far end of the cage, an aluminum toilet and a sink took up even more room. How was I going to stand this? ...I hardly saw the sun at all. They had perfected their prison..It felt like being sealed alive in a ship container."

Although U.S. politicians and ultra-right radio talk show hosts ridiculed the use of sleep deprivation against prisoners, this was, in fact, an insidious practice used earlier in Bolshevik Russia to torture known as "the conveyor belt." In 2002, Kurnaz writes, when General Geoffrey Miller took over command of Guantanamo, "The interrogations got more brutal, more frequent, and longer." Miller commenced "Operation Sandman," in which prisoners were moved to new cells every hour or two "to completely deprive us of sleep, and he achieved it." Kurnaz says, "I had to stand and kneel twenty-four hours a day," often in chains, and "I had barely arrived in a new cell and lay down on the bunk, before they came again to move me. ...As soon as the guards saw me close my eyes...they'd kick at the door or punch me in the face." In between transfers, "I was interrogated...I estimated the sessions lasted up to fifteen hours" during which the interrogator might disappear for hours at a time. "I sat chained to my chair or kneeling on the floor, and as soon as my eyelids drooped, soldiers would wake me with a couple of blows...Days and nights without sleep. Blows and new cages. Again, the stabbing sensation of thousands of needles throughout my entire body. I would have loved to step outside my body, but I couldn't...I went three weeks without sleep...the soldiers came at night and made us stand for hours on end at gunpoint. At this point, I weighed less than 130 pounds." Kurnaz was released to Germany in August, 2006, and testified by videolink in 2008 to the U.S. Congress. During his five years of confinement, he was never charged with a crime.

And so it happened that, during the presidency of George W. Bush, tens of thousands of innocent human beings, Kurnaz among them, were swept up in dragnet arrests by the invading American forces or their allies and imprisoned without legal recourse---the very opposite of what America's Founders gifted to humanity in their Constitution. None of the prisoners ever saw a real judge or jury. Torture among them was widespread. As for President Barack Obama, sworn to uphold a Constitution that does not permit torture, his failure to act forthrightly and, in particular, to ignore crimes by the CIA, an agency for which he once worked, would appear to make him guilty of subversion of that founding charter which he is legally obliged to honor. As for not taking action against the countless Pentagon operatives who tortured---including doctors and dentists and surgeons, etc.---Obama's inaction will permit these sadists to be returned one day to practice among the general civilian population. Think about that. Think, too, about the stain on the American flag that may never be washed clean.

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