

# Broken Laws, Broken Lives: The Consequences of Torture

Review of Physicians for Human Rights' Report

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Physicians for Human Rights, based in Washington, D.C., has just published a report entitled [Broken Laws, Broken Lives: Medical Evidence of Torture and its Impact](#). It presents a very detailed and exhaustive study of the medical evidence of torture by U.S. personnel and its impact on the victimized detainees. The group has effectively documented the systematic use of torture during interrogations at Abu Graib, Guantanamo Bay and elsewhere and they call for an immediate end to the use these illegal and immoral practices. The report is a damning indictment of the Bush administration and the use of so-called “enhanced” interrogation tactics. The opening paragraph of the preface sets a powerful tone for the rest of the report:

“This report tells the largely untold human story of what happened to detainees in our custody when the Commander-in-Chief and those under him authorized a systematic regime of torture. This story is not only written in words: It is scrawled for the rest of these individual’s lives on their bodies and minds. Our national honor is stained by the indignity and inhumane treatment these men received from their captors”.

The report focuses on the experiences of 11 former detainees who were subjected to degrading and humiliating treatment as well as barbaric physical and sexual abuse. It is worth noting that none of these individuals were ever charged with a crime and no reparations have been made to them. Among other things, these men were subjected to a wide variety of sadistic indecencies, including: prolonged isolation, sensory deprivation, sleep deprivation, forced nakedness, beatings, sodomy, electric shocks, severe stress positions, being forced to drink urine, and witnessing the desecration of the Koran.

The consequences for these men (who were never charged with any wrong doing) have been severe. Many of them are experiencing lasting problems with their physical health and some have developed severe psychiatric problems as a result of their experiences. The medical evaluations conducted by the group involved two day clinical interviews and the review of medical records (where available). These evaluations provide medical evidence that confirms the first hand accounts of men who were tortured by U.S. personnel in places like Iraq , Afghanistan , and Guantanamo Bay .

The following is a harrowing excerpt from the report of one man’s experiences while in U.S. custody. Unfortunately, it does not represent an isolated incident. It is typical of the way that many detainees have been treated by the American government and its personnel:

“Amir is in his late twenties and grew up in a Middle Eastern country. He was a salesman before being arrested by US forces in August 2003 in Iraq . After his arrest, he was forced, while shackled, to stand naked for at least five hours. For the next three days, he and other detainees were deprived of sleep and forced to run for long periods, during which time he injured his foot. After Amir notified a soldier of the injury, the soldier threw him against a wall and Amir lost consciousness. Ultimately, he was taken to another location, where he was kept in a small, dark room for almost a month while being subjected to interrogations that involved shackling, blindfolding, and humiliation. Approximately one month later, he was transferred to Abu Ghraib. At first he was not mistreated, but then was subjected to religious and sexual humiliation, hooding, sleep deprivation, restraint for hours while naked, and dousing with cold water. In the most horrific incident Amir recalled experiencing, he was placed in a foul-smelling room and forced to lay face down in urine, while he was hit and kicked on his back and side. Amir was then sodomized with a broomstick and forced to howl like a dog while a soldier urinated on him. After a soldier stepped on his genitals, he fainted. In July 2004, he was transferred to the prison at Camp Bucca , where he reported no abuse. He was returned to Abu Ghraib in November 2004 and released two days later.

Amir continues to experience physical symptoms consistent with the abuse he reported. Physical examination revealed features consistent with his account, including tenderness of one of his testicles and rectal tearing. Psychologically, he continues to suffer from debilitating symptoms of severe PTSD, disturbed sleep, moodiness, anxiety, sexual dysfunction, hostility and outbursts of anger, and very frequent suicidal thoughts. He has changed from a stable provider for his family to an unemployed man. Although stressors related to the war in Iraq may exacerbate his symptoms, his most debilitating symptoms are attributable to his experience of torture and sexual violation. “No sorrow can be compared to my torture experience in jail,” he said. “That is the reason for my sadness.”

The authors of the report make a number of important recommendations, which include:

1. The executive branch of the U.S. government should repudiate:

1. all forms of torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. It should explicitly and in writing establish a uniform standard of conduct for all agencies that prohibits any of its military, intelligence or other officials, including all forms of contract personnel, from engaging in torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, including but not limited to any of the following interrogation or conditions of confinement methods, either alone or in combination:

- Stress positions
- Beatings and other forms of physical assault
- Use of extremes of temperature
- Waterboarding or any other form of simulated drowning
- Threats of harm to the detainee, his family, or friends
- Sleep deprivation
- Sensory bombardment through the use of extreme noise and/or light

- Violent shaking
- Religious, cultural, and sexual humiliation, including, but not limited to, forced nakedness
- Prolonged isolation
- Sensory deprivation, including but not limited to hooding and blindfolding
- Use of psychotropic, mind-altering, or other drugs for the purpose of decreasing resistance or gaining information
- Mock execution
- Exploitation of phobias, psychopathology, or physical vulnerability
- Rape and sexual assault
- Electric shocks
- Deprivation of basic necessities and sanitary conditions

Congress should enact into law the prohibitions listed above and establish criminal liability for their violation

2. The executive branch and Congress should establish an independent commission to fully investigate and publicly report on the circumstances of detention and interrogation in Bagram, Kandahar, and elsewhere in Afghanistan, Iraq, Guantánamo Bay, and other locations since 2001. This independent commission should have subpoena power to compel witnesses and have full access to all classified materials concerning interrogation techniques and conditions of detention, including medical records and documentation by behavioral health science consultant personnel, in order to establish a full public record. The investigation should extend to individuals in the position of making policy as well as those who carried those policies out, including all healthcare professionals who were in the position of providing care or supporting the interrogation of detainees.

3. All individuals who played any role in the torture or ill-treatment of detainees, including those who authorized the use of methods amounting to torture or exercised command authority over them, should be held to account through criminal and civil processes (such as disciplinary action). Officials at every level should be held accountable for crimes they committed or for the acts of officials subordinate to them. Health professionals, both civilian and uniformed, who engaged in or facilitated the abuse of detainees and/or failed to report torture and ill-treatment should be investigated, appropriately sanctioned, and disciplined via the Department of Defense, other executive branch agencies, and state licensing boards.

4. The government should issue a formal apology to detainees who were subjected to torture and/or ill treatment as part of US military and intelligence operations since fall 2001 in Afghanistan, Iraq, Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, and elsewhere.

5. The government should establish a fair process for compensation and victim assistance, including access to rehabilitation and re-integration services, for individuals subjected to torture or ill-treatment in US custody.

6. All places of detention operated by the United States should be subject to monitoring by international bodies that investigate detainee treatment and are capable of reporting findings to the public and government, including the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture, the UN Committee Against Torture, and the International Committee of the Red Cross. These organizations tasked by treaties to which the United States is a party must be granted full access to detainees, their medical records, and all other pertinent files documenting past and current treatment of detainees during their incarceration. Furthermore, Congressional and executive branch oversight of US military and intelligence activities relevant to detainee treatment and interrogation should be immediately strengthened and improved.

7. The US Department of Justice should publicly release all legal opinions and other memoranda concerning standards regarding interrogation and detention policy and practices.

Broken Laws, Broke Lives leaves no doubt that prisoners in American custody were brutalized and tortured. The only remaining question is whether or not anyone will be held to account for what happened. Will anyone have the courage and moral fortitude to hold people in positions of power responsible for the grave injustices and outright savagery that occurred in U.S. prisons?

The report can be viewed here: <http://physiciansforhumanrights.org/>

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