

CIA Torture Program Exposed: More Than a 100 Detainees “Rendered” by U.S. With Help from Allies Including Canada

By [Asad Ismi](#)

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With the National Security Agency (NSA) spying scandal continuing to make news, another secretive U.S. agency is now the subject of its own public humiliation.

In early April, the U.S. Senate Intelligence Committee (SIC) voted to partially declassify a 6,600-page report on Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) treatment of “terror suspects” during the George W. Bush administration (2000-2008). Only the 480-page executive summary of the report, which investigates the interrogation, detention, rendition and often torture of more than 100 CIA detainees, will be released to the public along with 20 conclusions and findings. The summary will be made public after the CIA has vetted it for declassification, which could take months.

Senate Committee Chairwoman Dianne Feinstein, a Democratic senator from California, explained that the report “includes details of each detainee in CIA custody, the conditions under which they were detained, how they were interrogated, the intelligence they actually provided and the accuracy—or inaccuracy—of CIA descriptions about the program to the White House, Department of Justice, Congress and others.”

Feinstein called the report’s findings “shocking” and said the CIA’s behaviour was “in stark contrast to our values as a nation.” The report accuses the CIA of engaging in widespread torture, illegal detentions and kidnappings or “renderings” of suspected terrorists to partner countries, and “then misleading the Bush administration and Congress about its effectiveness in providing good intelligence,” which the Agency was unable to get much of from the detainees.

Failure and Incompetence

The Senate report is a scathing indictment CIA brutality and incompetence, and of the agency’s failure in the U.S.-led “Global War on Terror,” just as the country’s armed forces are now widely seen to have failed in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Feinstein also accused the CIA of secretly removing classified documents from a computer system used by Congress to compile the torture report, which she warned may have violated “the constitutional principle of congressional oversight, as well as both the Fourth Amendment and a presidential executive order that prohibits the CIA from engaging in domestic search and surveillance.”

“There’s a couple of stories [in the Senate report] that are so chilling that I can’t repeat them now,” said Republican Senator John McCain. One case he did mention was that of an agent reporting to CIA headquarters that he had “gotten everything we can out of the guy” through waterboarding. The message came back, “Waterboard him some more.” McCain called this “unconscionable.”

Waterboarding is a form of torture in which a victim is held down on a table with a cloth covering his face while water is poured over the cloth. It causes the person to gag and think that they are drowning. Since gagging can cause the victim to vomit, this form of torture, or “enhanced interrogation technique,” as the CIA refers to waterboarding, can kill a person. McCain pointed out that the U.S. hanged Japanese soldiers accused of waterboarding during the Second World War.

This “excruciating” torture on terror suspects produced little valuable intelligence for the CIA. One U.S. official who was briefed on the Senate report said: “The CIA described [its program] repeatedly both to the Department of Justice and eventually to Congress as getting unique, otherwise unobtainable intelligence that helped disrupt terrorist plots and save thousands of lives. Was that actually true? The answer is no.”

The high-profile CIA prisoner known as Abu Zubaida was waterboarded 83 times by the agency after his capture in Pakistan in 2002. But according to a U.S. official quoted in the Washington Post, almost all of the important information from Zubaida was obtained by FBI agent Ali Soufan in conversations with the suspect at a hospital in Pakistan. This didn’t stop the CIA from taking credit for getting this information in later communications with other U.S. intelligence agencies, the Justice Department and Congress.

“The CIA conflated what was gotten when, which led them to misrepresent the effectiveness of the program,” a second U.S. official told the Post, adding that the “persistence of such misstatements” was among “the most damaging” of the report’s conclusions. In other words, the CIA tortured blatantly and uselessly and then lied about the efficacy of its brutality.

Rendition and Black Sites

The CIA took another detainee known as Ammar Al-Baluchi from Pakistan to “Salt Pit” –one of several secret prisons, or “black sites,” the agency maintained in Kabul, Afghanistan. CIA torturers submerged Baluchi in a tub of ice water and kept his head underwater while he struggled to breathe. U.S. officials describe how his captors beat him repeatedly with something resembling a truncheon and smashed his head against a wall.

Mohammed Al-Shoroeiya and Khalid Al-Sharif, two other “Salt Pit” detainees from Libya, were tortured in a similar fashion by the agency. Their story came out through witness testimony in a 2012 Human Rights Watch report and is reproduced in the new Senate report. In another case, the CIA’s torture was so vicious that its own employees left a black site prison in Thailand. The Senate report confirms the role of the CIA in the deaths of at least six captives.

The CIA kidnapped 119 men and sent them to black sites, according to the report, which points out that 26 of these people wrongfully detained. Al Jazeera America reports, based on statements from anonymous U.S. officials who have seen the still classified report, that these detainees were: “rendered to other countries on the basis of intelligence obtained

from CIA captives under torture and from information shared with CIA officials by other governments, both of which turned out to be false. The report allegedly singles out a top CIA official for botching a handful of renditions and outlines agency efforts to cover up the mistakes.”

The Senate report also allegedly accuses senior CIA officials of “lying during multiple closed-session briefings to members of Congress from 2003 to 2005 about the use of certain enhanced interrogation techniques [torture],” according to the same Al Jazeera article, which adds that “an agency official lied to Congress in 2005 when he insisted the U.S. was adhering to international treaties barring cruel and degrading treatment of prisoners.”

Furthermore, according to U.S. officials quoted by Al Jazeera, the report suggests that in addition to lying to Congress, the CIA manipulated the press as well by sanctioning “leaks to selected journalists about phantom plots supposedly disrupted as a result of information gained through the program in order to craft a narrative of success.”

The Senate report includes what U.S. officials called “damning new disclosures” about an extensive network of CIA black sites that President Obama claimed to have shut down in 2009 along with banning torture.

Global Reach of CIA Torture

Amrit Singh of the Open Society Justice Initiative describes the global reach of the CIA’s rendition program and black site network in her 2013 report, “Globalizing Torture.” Singh highlights how 54 governments cooperated in the torture network, and that the CIA program would not have been possible without their active involvement. The network implicates governments in 25 European nations, including the United Kingdom, Germany, Belgium, Sweden, Iceland, Denmark, Greece, Poland and Romania.

Canada, too, is part of this torture network, as the well-known case of Maher Arar shows. The U.S. detained Arar, a Syrian-born Canadian, in New York in 2002 based on incorrect information supplied by the RCMP. He was swiftly deported to Syria where he was jailed and tortured for a year by state security. Arar returned to Canada in 2003.

Singh identifies 136 “terror suspects” kidnapped by the CIA, emphasizing the arbitrary nature of this definition and the people, like Arar, who have been picked up based on mistaken identity.

For example, she offers the case of Khaled El-Masri, a German national kidnapped in Macedonia under CIA direction on December 31, 2003 and abused by Macedonian security forces for 23 days. Masri was then given to the CIA, which flew him to Afghanistan for further abuse until May 2004. In December 2012, the European Court of Human Rights declared that Macedonia had violated El-Masri’s human rights protections under European law. The court added the CIA’s treatment of El-Masri at Skopje airport—he was sodomized with a suppository while Macedonian officials watched—amounted to torture.

Three years after Arar returned to Canada, a federal commission of inquiry into his deportation and torture recommended that the Canadian government not give sensitive information to another state “where there is a credible risk it will cause or contribute to the use of torture.” However, according to a declassified Defence Department memo revealed April 13, this advice has been ignored.

As reported by The Canadian Press on April 13, in 2011 the federal government secretly ordered five Canadian security agencies to share information with allies even when there is a “substantial risk” that this will lead to torture. As well as the military, the agencies included in this 2011 secret directive are the RCMP, Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA), Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS), and the Communications Security Establishment Canada (CSEC).

Will the U.S. Administration Act?

U.S. President Obama claims to have shut down CIA black sites but the Washington Post reported in January 2013 that renditions continue. In August 2012, three men of Somali background—Ali Yasin Ahmed, Mohamed Yusuf and Mahdi Hash—were arrested in the east-African nation of Djibouti on what the Post called a “murky pretext.” They were questioned by U.S. interrogators before being secretly indicted by a U.S. grand jury and flown to the United States for trial. The men’s whereabouts were unknown for months before they appeared in a New York courtroom for trial in December 2012.

The Senate report does not seek to prosecute a single CIA official for what are clearly crimes. Singh emphasizes that the 136 victims of CIA kidnapping and torture need to be provided with justice or else countries will continue to torture with impunity.

“Both as a legal matter and a matter of justice it is critical for courts to provide some measure of redress... so that this does not happen again,” she says. “What’s most important to a lot of [the victims] is the acknowledgement because they have been branded as terrorists without basis, and been abused and tortured. It’s appalling that U.S. courts have denied victims of U.S. rendition and torture their day in court – that every single case brought by a rendition victim in a U.S. court has been dismissed without the courts addressing the merits of the issue.”

The CIA has a long history of involvement in torture as well as military coups, assassinations, invasions, bombings and destabilizations that continues to this day. These interventions are estimated to have killed tens of millions of people in the Global South. Congressional investigations of CIA activities abroad in 1975, 1987 and 1989 failed to significantly curb the agency’s abuses, though this was admittedly not their intention since Congress is mostly interested in increasing its role in overseeing U.S. imperialism, not in stopping it.

*Asad Ismi is the CCPA Monitor’s international affairs correspondent. He is an expert on U.S. foreign policy and did his Ph.D. on the CIA. He is co-author of the book *Informed Dissent: Three Generals and the Vietnam War (1992)* which is available from 20 booksellers on the web. For his publications visit www.asadismi.ws.*

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