

# Iraqi Torture Scandal Touches Highest Levels of NATO

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*A scandal unfolding in Denmark over the transfer of Iraqi prisoners by Danish forces to Iraq authorities, even as they knew they would be tortured, threatens to implicate the current Secretary General of NATO Anders Fogh Rasmussen, formerly prime minister of Denmark from 2001-2009.*

The defense ministry in the government of former Prime Minister Rasmussen is charged with withholding its knowledge of Iraqi torture from legislators when a copy of a 2004 inspection at Al Makil prison in Basra was sent to Parliament.

According to an article last month in the Danish paper Politiken, portions of the report describing prisoner abuse were “blacked out,” with the reason given that such “information could harm Danish-Iraq cooperation.”

Yet, three months before the prison inspection, in May 2004, during a debate in the Danish Parliament concerning Iraqi prisoners, according to the paper Dagbladet Information, then-Prime Minister Rasmussen said the government would “disclose information about torture, if the government becomes aware that it occurs.” But evidently, this did not occur.

According to The Copenhagen Post, a Danish English-language daily, the July 2004 investigation by Danish Army legal adviser Maj. Kurt Borgkvist revealed that “prisoners in Iraqi prisons had been burned with cigarettes, had their molars crushed and been beaten around their genitals. Some were even missing fingers, Borgkvist reported.” The resulting report included photographic evidence, which has been described as “Abu Ghraib-lignende” (“Abu Ghraib-like”) by the previous Danish defense minister.

Rasmussen, leader of Denmark’s Liberal Party, resigned as prime minister in April 2009 in order to accept a position as NATO’s secretary general. Most recently, he was an outspoken supporter of NATO’s military support to the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime in Libya. Last November, the Liberal Party and its coalition partners lost power for the first time in almost a decade, losing to a coalition led by the Social Democrats. Rasmussen was also a key supporter of the US campaign to go to war in Iraq in 2003, ironically citing in a UN address Iraqi violations of international anti-torture treaties.

The scandal first arose in 2010 from documents released by WikiLeaks in the “Iraq War Logs.” A November 2010 article at Ice News reported how a memo released by WikiLeaks described an inquiry by “a Danish Defence Ministry official” regarding “what happened at the American Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq after media reports of torture and abuse in 2003.” Subsequently, “Danish soldiers continued to hand over prisoners to the facility, however,

even after the torture was officially confirmed several months later.”

“That Denmark didn’t intervene in time simply shows that someone must have stopped the criticism at the political level’, said Social Democratic Defense Spokesman John Dyrby Paulsen. ‘That is also why we want an inquiry into all of this’, he added.”

An October 2010 story in Dagbladet Information noted that “coalition forces share military reports” and “the Danish military has also had access to accounts on Iraqi police methods,” indicating that all the coalition forces, Denmark included, “had knowledge of the situation which was consistent with several highly critical warnings from organizations such as The International Red Cross and Human Rights Watch.”

A government commission into Denmark’s involvement in the Iraq war is expected later this year. The last Danish forces left Iraq last November.

The WikiLeaks logs also revealed that Danish forces in Iraq had been involved in turning greater numbers of prisoners over to the Iraqis than the Danish government had previously revealed.

According to a report at WikiLeaks Press, former Danish Defense Minister Søren Gade previously told the Danish Parliament that Danish troops had only 21 prisoners. But according to the leaked “War Logs,” “the actual number of prisoners taken in the period at a minimum of 95. Of these, 62 were handed over to Iraqi authorities, who were well known to be carrying out torture in Iraqi prisons.” In reply, the Defense Ministry “argued that the reason for the great disparity between the reported number of prisoners was due to the fact that many of the prisoners had been captured by British troops and that the Danish troops therefore could not be held accountable.”

But recent revelations have seen the number of prisoners actually handed over has grown from a later admitted 200 to a reported 500 or more. The higher number surfaced in a memorandum from Defense Chief Gen. Knud Bartels to the new Defense Minister Nick Hækkerup. (Bartels, himself, has recently assumed the position of NATO’s Military Committee chairman.)

In a January 2 article, The Copenhagen Post reported that Denmark’s former Defense Minister Søren Gade would be called as a witness in an upcoming trial, stemming from a lawsuit by six Iraqis who were arrested in winter 2004 by Danish forces supporting the US-led coalition forces in Iraq. The prisoners were turned over to Iraqi forces and subsequently tortured.

As the Post notes, “According to international law, soldiers may not deliver prisoners of war to another authority they suspect of mistreating or torturing prisoners.” This international prohibition is written into the UN Convention Against Torture, which states that no signatory to the treaty can return or refole any person to a state authority “where there are substantial grounds for believing that he would be in danger of being subjected to torture.”

In a January 5 editorial, the Post insisted that “ordering soldiers to turn a blind eye to the likely mistreatment of detainees amounts to a cold-blooded disregard for the well-being of others.” The paper called for the Danish military to cooperate with any investigations, “even if that means allowing top brass, former ministers or senior statesmen to be felled in the process.”

A further dimension to the scandal concerns not only the number of prisoners involved, but also the ways the Danes tried to hide their culpability.

The Bartels letter to Hækkerup also described, according to Politiken, how “in a few cases’ Iraqi prisoners were illegally handed over to Iraqi authorities and that in many cases Danish troops avoided defence directives by letting British troops detain Iraqis during joint missions in order to avoid responsibility.”

The controversy over handing over prisoners to be tortured by Iraqi forces has not been limited to Denmark. Indeed, after the release of the WikiLeaks “Iraq War Logs,” numerous reports of such transfers of prisoners, despite knowledge of torture practices, were published in the British and US press.

According to the publication of one of the “Iraq War Logs” by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, in at least one case, a US military interrogator threatened a prisoner with being turned over to the notorious Iraqi Wolf Brigade, “where he would be subject to all the pain and agony that the wolf battalion is known to exact upon its detainees.”

Similar charges of coalition forces turning prisoners over for torture in Afghanistan have also raised controversy. Last September, NATO announced it was suspending many such transfers after years of reports of torture by Afghan security and military personnel.

The Obama administration has pointedly refused to initiate any investigations into US torture, while the British government has announced formation of a government commission to look into the torture charges. The British commission, which has yet to begin its work, has been boycotted by human rights groups, who describe the commission as “toothless” and lacking “meaningful, independent” review.

NATO headquarters did not return a request for comment as of press time. In addition, attempts to verify details of “Iraq War Logs” information were stymied by what appears to be an Internet-wide suppression of the formerly available documents.

Editor’s note: This report has been updated to correct the date of Anders Fogh Rasmussen’s resignation and the titles of two Danish news publications.

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