

Madiba: Nelson Mandela Fights For His Life...Again!

By [Danny Schechter](#)

Region: [sub-Saharan Africa](#)

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Nelson Mandela is fighting for his life again—his third hospitalization in four months as the world looks on with silent prayers. The media attention he is receiving speaks to the respect with which he is held, even though most of the coverage points more to his age than the fact that the respiratory condition he has was contracted under brutal prison conditions and he clearly, even now, is a victim of the apartheid system he battled into submission.

The world media is pumped by another deathwatch. In South Africa, Madiba, as he is known by his clan name, is called a “FBR”—the Freelancers Best Friend—because of all the work the around the clock coverage his condition inspires. At the BBC in London, striking staffers say they will return to work to cover his death.

When he and his comrades arrived on South Africa’s draconian Robben Island, he was the 466th to be incarcerated in 1964. Hence, his prison number 46664, later used as a symbol in a campaign against AIDS.

He and his comrades, all considered terrorists by the all white government, were told the only way they would ever leave was in a box. He spent 28 years behind bars in all, fighting for his life and dignity daily. One of his prison guards told me the daily regimen of breaking rocks at the Island’s quarry was deliberate, designed to weaken the men and exhaust them.

The Robben Island story is told in detail in his autobiography, Long Walk to Freedom, which has now been turned by Anant Singh into an epic movie for release later this year.

Robben Island is now a tourist attraction, a world heritage site, a symbol of “victory” in the eyes of those former prisoners who survived long enough to help topple the system.

When he was still a Senator, Barack Obama was shown around Robben Island by Mandela’s former prisonmate, Ahmed Kathrada, and like all visitors, was horrified by what he saw.

“Kathy” as he is known, is a Muslim but in those years he was labeled by his ethnicity, not his religion, as an Indian and was given privileges—that he declined—because he was not considered black and blacks were to be treated worse. Muslim terrorists didn’t inspire special fear back then.

You will recall that in those years, Obama was promising to close Gitmo, our Robben Island. He never did, and in fact, its barbarities have now sparked hunger strikes and protests as his administration, like the White South Africans in some cases, made their sentences indefinite.

Today, he calls Mandela to wish him well but remains silent on the prison practices that still shame our country, And, not just Gitmo. The brutalities against prisoners committed by US forces in Iraq and Afghanistan were deliberate, and only modified after they were exposed

by the media.

These practices are not just reserved for foreign prisoners. Go see the documentary “The House I Live In” and experience prison conditions and a mass incarceration industry in the USA that makes Mandela’s treatment pale by comparison.

The war on terror is alive and spreading by both the terrorists and our efforts to contain them. The drones are the most visible manifestation of counter terror measures that continue to menace and kill innocent civilians.

Friday’s New York Times carried a page one story, headlined, “Taliban Terrorize Karachi As The New Gang in Town.” The Times does not feature this story also published on that date, from an Afghanistan-based journalist, Matthew J. Nasuti writing in Kabul Press:

“Scattered throughout Afghanistan are secret CIA militias that may be functioning as death squads.

Reports of their activities have surfaced for years in eastern Afghanistan, especially in Khost Province, but they have also been reported in Spin Boldak, Kandahar and the latest in Maidan Wardak Province, where residents are rising up in protest.

For the past month newspapers around the world have been filled with headlines about villagers and students disappearing and being killed in Maidan Wardak by CIA and Special Forces personnel and their allies.

The reports have blackened America’s image.

The stories are disturbingly similar. Villagers are seized in their homes at night and are never heard from again. Bodies are dumped in the countryside with signs of torture.

The Taliban are ousted from areas only to have the vacuum filled by criminal gangs with ties to the CIA. The idea seems to replace one terror group with another, as long as the second group pledges loyalty to the United States. This is what U.S. security agencies call “counter-terrorism.”...

Meanwhile, President Obama is saying “shame on us” if Congress forgets the massacre of students in Newtown.”

The double standards and selective outrage goes on. Tom Englehardt shames us even more by remembering in his Tom Dispatch what most of our media does not:

“It’s true that, last week, few in Congress cared to discuss, no less memorialize, the 10th anniversary of the invasion of Iraq. Nonetheless, two anniversaries of American disasters and crimes abroad — the “mission accomplished” debacle of 2003 and the 45th anniversary of the My Lai massacre — were at least noted in passing in our world. In my hometown paper, the New York Times, the Iraq anniversary was memorialized with a lead op-ed by a former advisor to General David Petraeus who, amid the rubble, went in search of all-American “silver linings.”

Still, in our post-9/11 world, there are so many other anniversaries from hell whose silver linings don’t get noticed. Take this April. It will be the ninth anniversary of the widespread

release of the now infamous photos of torture, abuse, and humiliation from Abu Ghraib. In case you've forgotten, that was Saddam Hussein's old prison where the U.S. military taught the fallen Iraqi dictator a trick or two about the destruction of human beings. Shouldn't there be an anniversary of some note there? I mean, how many cultures have turned dog collars (and the dogs that go with them), thumbs-up signs over dead bodies, and a mockery of the crucified Christ into screensavers?

Or to pick another not-to-be-missed anniversary that, strangely enough, goes uncelebrated here, consider the passage of the USA Patriot Act, that ten-letter acronym for "Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism"? This October 26th will be the 11th anniversary of the hurried congressional vote on that 363-page (essentially unread) document filled with right-wing hobbyhorses and a range of provisions meant to curtail American liberties in the name of keeping us safe from terror."

So, by all means. let us pray for Nelson Mandela, who has earned more than prayers by his lifetime of service and sacrifice. I have been privileged to do documentary films with him about his fights and achievements, while recognizing that many of the goals he fought for have yet to be achieved in a society still dominated by mostly white controlled business and neo-liberal economic policies.

Let us also join, or at least support the ongoing fight. there and here. for economic and social justice that he symbolizes. As he recognizes, the Long Walk goes on.

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