

Torture Never Stopped Under Obama

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“A year on, the [Obama] administration continues to look the other way when it comes to full disclosure of and remedy for human rights violations perpetrated by the U.S.A. in the name of countering terrorism.” - Amnesty International

What is Torture? It can be physical or psychological, quick or unhurried. It implies lasting trauma unbecoming a human. The U.N. defines torture as:

“...any act by which severe pain or suffering, physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him, or a third person, information or a confession...” (U.N. Convention Against Torture).

By this definition the U.S. continues to practice torture. Yes, Obama outlawed some especially shocking forms of torture — water boarding, for example — but other types of torture were not labeled “torture” and thus continue.

Surprisingly, this fact was recently discussed at length in The New York Times, under an Op-Ed piece appropriately entitled *Torture’s Loopholes*. In it, an ex-interrogator explains some of the more glaring examples of how the U.S. currently tortures and argues for the practices to end. In reference to Obama’s vow to end the systematic, obscene torture under Bush, the article states:

“...the changes were not as drastic as most Americans think, and elements of our interrogation policy continue to be both inhumane and counterproductive.”

The author says bluntly, “If I were to return to one of the war zones today... I would still be allowed to abuse [torture] prisoners.”

The article also explains how the U.S. “legally” continues a practice that thousands of people in the U.S. prison system already know to be psychological torture:

“...extended solitary confinement is torture, as confirmed by many scientific studies. Even the initial 30 days of isolation could be considered abuse [torture].”

Other forms of torture commonly practiced — since they are part of the Military’s updated Field Manual — are “...stress positions [shackling prisoners in painful positions for extended

periods of time], putting detainees into close confinement or environmental manipulation [hot or frigid rooms]...”

Also mentioned as torture is sleep deprivation, a tactic used in combination with 20-hour interrogation sessions. The author concludes that these practices do “not meet the minimum standard of humane treatment, either in terms of American law or simple human decency.” (January 20, 2010).

Unmentioned by the article are other forms of torture institutionalized under the Obama administration. One is “sensory deprivation,” a deeply traumatizing psychological torture described in detail in Naomi Klein’s *Shock Doctrine*. The new Army Field Manual says that the tactic — though not called “sensory deprivation” — should be used to “prolong the shock of capture,” and should include “goggles or blindfolds and earmuffs” that completely disconnects the senses from the outside world, where the captive is able to experience only the thoughts in their head.

Yet another blatant form of torture that Obama refused to stop practicing is “extraordinary rendition,” or what critics call “outsourcing torture.” This is the practice of flying a prisoner to a country where torture is routinely practiced, so that the prisoner can be interrogated. As reported by *The New York Times*:

“The Obama administration will continue the Bush administration’s practice of sending terrorism suspects to third countries for detention and interrogation, but pledges to closely monitor their treatment to ensure that they are not tortured, administration officials said Monday.” (August 24, 2009).

Human rights groups instantly called Obama’s bluff: why transport terrorism suspects to other countries at all? If not for the fact that torture and other “harsh interrogation methods” are routinely practiced there? No justifiable answer has been given to these questions.

Another common way the U.S. continues to outsource torture is performed in the Afghanistan and Iraq wars. There, the U.S. military often arrests suspects and hands over the interrogation duties to Iraqi or Afghan security forces, knowing full well that they regularly torture (this was also the strategy in the Vietnam war). Unfortunately, handing over someone to be tortured means you are also guilty of the crime.

A less obvious form of torture is the concept of “indefinite detention” — holding someone in prison indefinitely without a trial. The terrible experience of hopelessness that a victim of this crime experiences, over years, is a profound form of psychological torture. This is one of the reasons why the American Constitution guarantees due process, a legal detail that the Obama administration continues to ignore.

In connection, *The Washington Post* recently announced that the Obama administration will detain 50 Guantanamo inmates “indefinitely,” without any legal charges or chance of a trial. This act is consistent with earlier statements made by Obama, when he stated that “some detainees are too dangerous, to be released.” Of course, there does not exist any evidence to prove that these detainees are dangerous, otherwise they would be prosecuted in a legal court. The article reports that these detainees are “un-prosecutable because officials fear trials...could challenge evidence obtained through coercion [torture].” (January

22, 2010).

The Washington Post article also reports that 35 additional Guantanamo inmates will be tried in Federal or Military courts. In the latter court, far less evidence — if any — is needed, and the military jury can be handpicked to deliver the preferred outcome.

Obama, like Bush, has sought to undermine the legal rights of those detained and the victims of torture who seek accountability. Obama continues to refuse to release pictures (evidence) of detainee abuse, preventing Americans from really understanding what their government is guilty of. Obama has also refused detainees in so-called “black sites” (U.S. Bagram Air Base, for example) access to attorneys or courts. Finally, by not prosecuting anyone for torture crimes in the Bush administration, Obama is guaranteeing that the worst forms of torture will continue, since institutionalized behavior rarely stops unless rewards or punishments are implemented.

In the end, the act of torture is impossible to separate from war in general. The “rules of war” are always ignored by both sides, who implement the most barbaric acts to terrorize their opponents into submission.

Obama’s wars, like Bush’s, are wars of conquest. U.S. corporations want the oil and other raw materials in the region. They also want to privatize the conquered state-owned companies, and to sell U.S. products in the new markets the war has opened them. Many corporations benefit from the act of war itself (arms manufacturers and corporate-employed mercenaries), or from the reconstruction opportunities the destruction creates.

Working people have no interest in this type of war. The hundreds of billions of dollars that Obama is using for destruction should be used to create jobs instead, or for health care, public education, social services, etc. It is up to all working people to organize themselves — through their unions and community organizations — to broadcast this demand and make it a reality.

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