

Tortured in far-off Countries: Obama Resuming G. W. Bush's "Extraordinary Renditions"

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Even though Barack Obama, the candidate, pledged to end "the practice of shipping away prisoners in the dead of night to be tortured in far-off countries," his FBI has been rendering kidnap victims to the U.S. The practice is still kidnapping, however; and it's still illegal.

Unlucky victim No. 1 was Raymond Azar, 45, flown from Afghanistan to Alexandria, Va., not to a foreign country. The construction manager for Sima International, a Lebanese outfit that did work for the U.S. military, Azar said he was tortured by his abductors. He might just as well have been flown to Egypt under the Bushes.

Interestingly, Azar was never charged as a dangerous terrorist, only with conspiracy to commit bribery for wiring \$106,000 in kickbacks to a U.S. employee's bank account in hopes of getting \$13 million in unpaid bills okayed.

For this comparatively trivial white collar crime, Azar's lawyers said when arrested he was stripped naked, hooded, and subjected to a body cavity search. What's more, according to an article by Scott Horton, writing on "Common Dreams," Azar claims a federal agent showed Azar a photo of his wife and four children and told him to confess or else he might "never see them again." Azar confessed, and pled guilty to conspiracy to commit bribery.

Azar alleged he was shackled to an office chair for seven hours, put in an unheated metal shipping container and given only a thin blanket despite near freezing temperature, denied sleep and food for 30 hours, had his ears covered by earphones and blindfolded during his plane ride from Kabul, Afghanistan, to the U.S., Horton reported. Court records indicate Azar was shackled at the ankles, waist, and wrists.

"These procedures—particularly the blindfolding and shackling—correspond to standard Bush-era enhanced interrogation techniques, which President Obama declared banned immediately on his arrival in office," Horton noted.

The arrest of this manager was made by no fewer than 10 men wearing flak jackets and carrying military style assault weapons, according to legal papers filed by Azar's lawyers. Maybe they expected him to be toting a wrecking ball.

"Bizarre," is how Joanne Mariner of Human Rights Watch described the rendition. "He was treated like a high-security terrorist instead of someone accused of a relatively minor white-collar crime," she told the Los Angeles Times August 22nd.

Removing Azar from Afghanistan would only be legal with approval of that government but Interior Ministry officials there said no such approval was requested by the U.S.

International law professor Philippe Sands of London University is quoted by Horton as terming Azar's allegations "deeply troubling" in that they indicate "clear violations of international norms on due process and detainee treatment."

Under "extraordinary rendition," alleged terror suspects in the past have been abducted by the CIA and flown to be tortured (and/or murdered) to Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Morocco, Jordan and Uzbekistan, among other venues. The practice was started in 1996 under President Bill Clinton, who is said to have rendered 80 suspects, and was vastly expanded by President George W. Bush after 9/11.

Rendition on its face is a violation of Article 3 of the United Nations Convention Against Torture, ratified by the U.S. in 1994. As Wikipedia notes, "Rendered suspects are denied due process because they are arrested without charges and deprived of legal counsel."

During his appearance before the Senate Intelligence Committee last February, CIA nominee Leon Panetta, now Agency Director, said, "I think renditions where we return individuals to another country where they prosecute them under their laws, I think that is an appropriate use of rendition," the Associated Press reported.

Obama's aides have said they will count on the diplomatic assurances of the other countries not to torture suspects. Amrit Singh, a lawyer with the American Civil Liberties Union, said such assurances have "proven completely ineffective in preventing torture."

With some modifications, the Obama administration appears to be carrying forward the ugly practices of the Bush and Clinton imperial presidencies, hardly the "change" for which the American people had hoped. Unless you count "chump change."

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