

UN Report Details US Human Rights Abuses

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A UN Human Rights Committee (HRC) report delivered in mid-March harshly criticized the United States, citing a laundry list of human rights violations both on American soil and in countries around the world.

The report, compiled from the testimony of 18 independent experts, detailed rampant violations by the US government of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

The report condemned the US for failing to punish high-ranking military officers and private contractors for crimes, including torture and targeted killings, saying that only a “meager number” of criminal charges had been pressed, and against low-ranking personnel at that.

“The Committee notes with concern that all reported investigations into enforced disappearances, torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment that had been committed in the context of the CIA secret rendition, interrogation and detention programmes were closed in 2012 leading only to a meager number of criminal charges brought against low-level operatives,” the HRC concluded.

Testimony to the HRC highlighted the use of drones by the US to carry out targeted killings in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia and elsewhere. Since Obama took office, US drones have killed more than 2,600 people in at least 400 strikes, according to documents submitted to the HRC by Human Rights Watch (HRW).

US imperialism has created a worldwide system of illegal prison camps, where US and foreign personnel carry out torture against supposed terrorists and other enemies of the American state. Evidence submitted to the hearing showed that the US is currently continuing to hold 154 detainees who have been cleared at its prison camp in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and that an additional 45 are being held on an indefinite basis without charges or trial.

The report found that the US applies “broad doctrines of legal privilege and immunity” to prevent torture victims from seeking compensation against their torturers.

As reaffirmed by US representatives during the course of the hearing, the US government invoked the principle of “extraterritoriality” to exempt itself from compliance with the ICCPR on foreign soil (the only other country to explicitly exempt itself in this way is Israel). The Obama administration’s position is that the ICCPR does not impose any “human rights obligations on American military and intelligence when they operate abroad.”

“The United States continues to believe that its interpretation—that the covenant applies

only to individuals both within its territory and within its jurisdiction—is the most consistent with the covenant’s language and negotiating history,” said Mary McLeod, legal representative from the State Department, during the committee hearing.

“The U.S. insists it has no international legal obligations to respect the privacy rights of foreigners outside its borders,” said Andrea Prasow of Human Rights Watch.

The reports submitted to the HRC listed massive violations of the ICCPR also taking place within the US itself. Domestic violations cited during the reports included:

- Inhuman treatment of migrants, including use of lethal force on the US-Mexico border
- Dagnet surveillance
- Labor trafficking
- Widespread use of solitary confinement
- Trials of juveniles as adults, the use of life sentences against juveniles, incarceration of juveniles in adult institutions
- Criminalization of homelessness
- Racial profiling
- Stop-and-frisk policies
- Use of Special Administrative Measures (SAM), including monitoring of prison-attorney communications
- Widespread use of nonconsensual administration of psychiatric medication, electroshock, and other “coercive health practices”

The HRC gathered testimony from nongovernmental human rights groups on the American military operations. A “shadow report” submitted by the Center for Constitutional Rights (CCR) to the HRC, entitled “US Veterans and Iraqi Organizations Seek Accountability for Human Rights Crisis Resulting from a Decade of US-Led War,” noted “the lack of any recognition whatsoever by the US government of the disastrous and tragic consequences” caused by the war against Iraq.

The report pointed to extensive use of toxic weapons against the population, writing, “Iraq is now in the midst of a public health crisis, the full magnitude of which is still unknown, as cancer rates and birth defects have skyrocketed since the US invasion—widely believed to be the result of the US’s use of weapons made of depleted uranium as well as the unregulated use of other munitions and burn pits used to dispose of toxic waste.”

“In addition to the use of weapons containing depleted uranium, US officials and allies have admitted to using napalm-class munitions and white phosphorous, an incendiary agent that can burn to the bone, in Fallujah, Iraq and elsewhere. These weapons were reported to have been used in operations in populated areas and resulted in grave harm to civilians, including children. Similarly, the use of cluster munitions, which spread over a wide area and often fail to explode on impact, have resulted in the indiscriminate killing of civilians,” the CCR wrote.

“Despite having waged an illegal war based on false justifications, no civilian or military official has been investigated or held accountable for their role in fabricating the justification to go to war in Iraq. In fact, the current administration recently argued in a legal case brought by victims of the Iraq war that officials responsible for planning and waging the war in violation of international law should be afforded immunity and shielded from suit,” the report found.

According to the CCR’s shadow report, “conservative estimates” show that the US war against Iraq caused the direct deaths of 330,000 people, with indirect deaths resulting from unexploded weapons, malnutrition, the collapse of Iraq’s health infrastructure and the environmental fallout from the war totaling more than 1 million. Some additional 4.5 million Iraqis were turned into refugees by the war, and at least 4 million Iraqi children lost one or both parents.

Under the mantle of promoting human rights and democracy, US imperialism has been invading countries and overthrowing governments around the world for decades. As the latest UN report makes clear, Washington’s human rights pose is a fraud. The US government itself is the leading human rights violator on the planet, using whatever means necessary, including mass terror against civilian areas, to maintain the supremacy of American capitalism.

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