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Rights Group Draws Link to the CIA

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BODY:

Three Yemeni nationals who were arrested in late 2003 say they were transferred to U.S. custody and kept isolated in at least four secret detention facilities that Amnesty International officials believe could be part of a covert CIA prison system.

The three detainees have not said they were physically abused while in U.S. custody, but they describe being whisked away in airplanes to unknown locations where they were interrogated by Americans in civilian clothes, according to an Amnesty International report. At one prison, the detainees were guarded by people in all-black "ninja" suits, who communicated using hand gestures.

During their separate incarcerations, the detainees were never visited by the International Committee of the Red Cross, never had access to lawyers, were unable to correspond with their families and had no contact with the outside world, the report said. Their families believed they were dead or were told that they had gone to Iraq to fight the United States.

The accounts, taken in independent interviews by Amnesty International researchers over the past few months, appear to be consistent with reports of a network of secret CIA detention facilities, according to the report. The detainees could not determine where they were because they were hooded during the flights, but because of the travel time they assumed they were in Europe or the Middle East, according to Amnesty International.

"We've tried working out where they might have been, but it's so subjective," said Anne FitzGerald, senior adviser on research policy for Amnesty International, who interviewed the detainees in two Yemeni prisons. "It's clear

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they were in facilities that were designed to hold many people, not just them. But they really didn't know where they were."

The CIA declined to comment Friday.

In a telephone interview from London last week, FitzGerald said she believes the detainees' stories are credible because they were each detained separately and were unable to communicate with one another before the United States turned them over to the Yemeni government in May. One of the detainees has never met the other two and is now kept in a separate facility, yet his story is consistent, she said.

Muhammad Assad was arrested in his home of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, on Dec. 26, 2003, for alleged passport problems. A Yemeni native, Assad had lived in Tanzania for 20 years.

After his arrest and initial questioning, Assad was taken to a waiting airplane, and his family was told that he was deported to Yemen, according to Amnesty International. Yemeni authorities denied that Assad had entered the country, and Tanzania later informed Assad's father that he had been turned over to U.S. officials.

Assad believes he was arrested because of his connections to a charity that was "blacklisted" after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks for allegedly funding terrorism. The al Haramain Islamic Foundation, a Saudi Arabian charity, had rented space in a building Assad owned. It is the only topic Assad was questioned about in his 15 months of incarceration.

He was first taken on a small airplane that flew for about two to three hours, and was interrogated for two weeks by Arabic-speaking people, according to the report. He was then flown elsewhere, a flight that he believes lasted about 11 hours, with a one-hour stop-over. When he arrived, his surroundings were much colder, and he was interrogated by white men who spoke what he believed to be American English.

"There was nothing haphazard or makeshift about the detention regime, it was carefully designed to induce maximum disorientation, dependence and stress in the detainees," according to the 20-page report. "The men were subjected to extreme sensory deprivation; for over a year they did not know what country they were in, whether it was night or day, whether it was raining or sunny. They spoke to no one but their interrogators, through translators, and no one spoke to them."

Salah Ali and Muhammad Bashmilah, who were living in Indonesia, were arrested in August and October 2003, respectively; Ali in Jakarta and Bashmilah in Amman, Jordan. They were taken to a Jordanian prison and tortured -- badly beaten and chained in uncomfortable positions -- by Jordanian authorities before being transferred to U.S. custody, according to Amnesty International. Both men had traveled to Afghanistan in 2000 to learn about jihad, but neither man fought against the United States, according to FitzGerald.

Ali said he was stripped and beaten with sticks by a ring of masked soldiers. "They tried to force me to walk like an animal, on my hands and feet, and I refused," Ali told Amnesty, "so they stretched me out on the floor and walked on me and put their shoes in my mouth."

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Ali and Bashmilah recount similar stories after their transfer to U.S. custody in a place Amnesty International believes could have been Eastern Europe. They were put into a windowless, underground facility, each was isolated in a tiny cell, and their jailers and interrogators spoke English with American accents. In April 2004, they were moved to a new facility with "no pictures or ornaments on the walls, no floor coverings, no windows, no natural light," according to the report. It was here that the guards dressed in all black.

FitzGerald said that the two Indonesian detainees were barely interrogated after their first few weeks, perhaps an acknowledgment that they did not know much. All three were released to Yemeni authorities in May. Ali and Bashmilah are in the central prison in Aden, and Assad is at a security prison at Al Ghaydah. Their families now know they are alive, FitzGerald said.

"The cases of the three 'disappeared' Yemenis documented in this report . . . suggest that the network of clandestine interrogation centres is not reserved solely for high-value detainees, but may be larger, more comprehensive and better organized than previously suspected," the report says.

Such "incommunicado" detentions are against international standards but are consistent with recent reports of how the CIA operated its detention network.

Manfred Nowak, the U.N. rapporteur on torture, said in an interview last week that secret facilities are a particularly important issue because there is no outside oversight and no ability to know which detainees are in custody or where they are held. He condemned the practice.

"Incommunicado detention forms inhumane treatment in and of itself," Nowak said.

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HUMAN RIGHTS-US: Exporting Torture

By Tito Drago



MADRID, Nov 9 (IPS) - The U.S. government prohibits torture on its own soil, but operates secret prisons in various parts of the world where human rights are regularly violated, maintained political analyst Roberto Montoya and rights activist Miguel Ángel Calderón in interviews with IPS.

In response to a U.S. Department of Defence directive made public Tuesday, which specifically prohibits acts of physical and mental torture and states that "all captured or detained personnel shall be treated humanely," Calderón called for "clear signs that they will comply with the Geneva Conventions (on treatment of prisoners of war) and stop the use of torture."

Calderón, communications director for the Spanish chapter of human rights watchdog Amnesty International, stressed that "all detainees should be tried in accordance with national and international laws or else be released."

Moreover, he said, "the Red Cross should be allowed access to all detention centres, which means that those which are still secret must no longer be so."

On Monday, Amnesty International released a report providing detailed information on three Yemeni nationals who were illegally held in secret detention centres or "black sites" run by the United States.

Muhammad al-Assad, Salah Ali and Muhammad Bashmilah were arrested in Yemen in 2003 and handed over to U.S. custody, at which point they "disappeared" for a year and a half until resurfacing in Yemeni custody this past May.

Through interviews with the three men after they were released, Amnesty International uncovered evidence that during the interim, they had been held in complete isolation in a series of U.S.-run secret detention centres.

While there have been widespread reports recently that the United States is holding two to three dozen "high-value" detainees at secret CIA-run facilities outside the country, the cases of the three "disappeared" Yemenis documented in the new Amnesty International report "suggest that the network of clandestine interrogation centres is not reserved solely for high-value detainees, but may be larger, more comprehensive and better organised than previously suspected," the report maintains.

For his part, Montoya said it was "strange" that the new Department of Defence directives were issued "at the same time that Washington is trying to boycott an amendment introduced by Senator (John) McCain that opposes the government's stance that there should be exceptions made for special intelligence operations abroad."

McCain, a senator from the ruling Republican Party - as well as a Vietnam veteran who was himself tortured as a prisoner of war - is the author of an amendment attached to a revised military spending bill that would ban the use of "cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment" against anyone in U.S. government custody.

The White House unsuccessfully lobbied McCain to exempt the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) from the measure, and has threatened to veto the bill if it includes the amendment.

Montoya called the new Pentagon directives hypocritical, and recalled that while U.S. President George W. Bush declared that the United States respects all "relevant" national and international laws, internal documents from the Pentagon itself subsequently demonstrated that defence authorities knew about the abuse of prisoners in places like Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq.

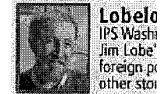
The journalist and international relations specialist has just published a new book, La inmunidad imperial (Imperial Immunity), which documents the illegal activities of U.S. military and intelligence personnel in other countries.

Montoya, who is currently the international news desk director at the Madrid daily El Mundo, is originally from Argentina, where he was imprisoned and tortured during the 1966-1973 military dictatorship.

He went into exile in Paris in 1976, when the Argentine army staged another coup and installed a de facto military regime that ruled until 1983. Montoya later moved to Spain, and began to write for ElMundo in 1992.

His book documents the existence of reports written "in his own hand" by U.S. Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, which "give the green light" for the use of torture. Consequently, noted Montoya, human rights abuses are not "exceptions", but rather have been perpetrated on higher orders in Iraq, Afghanistan and the U.S. military base in Guantánamo, Cuba.

Some of the CIA's illegal activities are carried out by private companies used as "fronts", Montoya added, or



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by former agents no longer officially connected to the agency. There is also evidence of the use of civilian aircraft to transport illegal detainees.

Montoya pointed out that the U.S. military has undergone growing privatisation, and noted that during the administration of George Bush (1989-1993), the current president's father, Dick Cheney requested a study of the potential benefits to be gained by the Armed Forces by contracting out services.

Today, with Cheney as vice president, the U.S. military is backed up by over 20,000 mercenaries in Iraq and Afghanistan alone, he said.

Montoya's book provides detailed accounts of concrete cases like the illegal detention in 2003 of Egyptian Islamic cleric Abu Omar in Milan, Italy. He was kidnapped in broad daylight by 13 men who were eventually identified through a cell phone records check authorised by a court order.

Investigations revealed that all of Abu Omar's abductors were CIA agents who took him to Egypt on a plane that took off from the air base in Aviano, Italy.

He eventually turned up in custody in Egypt, where he told his family that he had been tortured both in Aviano and the Egyptian jail where he was being held.

Despite the fact that all 13 CIA agents were identified, the U.S. government refused to hand them over to stand trial in Italy.

Another case documented in the new book is that of a Lebanese-born German citizen who was arrested in Macedonia near the Serbian border and taken first to Afghanistan and then to Iraq, where he was tortured and released three months later.

The victim in this case declared that the plane on which he was transported made a stopover in Palma de Mallorca, the capital of the Balearic Islands located off Spain's Mediterranean coast.

This information helped Montoya locate and publish a photograph of the three civilian planes used by the CIA, whose licence numbers were registered at the airports in both Palma de Mallorca and the Canary Islands, another Spanish territory, off the northwest coast of Africa.

"I knew from conversations with airline pilots that a lot of them have the hobby of taking pictures of planes and posting them on a website," explained Montoya.

He then began to comb through the pictures on the Internet until he found the three planes that corresponded to the licence numbers in question, and published the photographs in his book.

In addition, he investigated the private companies that collaborate with the CIA and found a number in the United Kingdom, as well as South Africa, in addition to those from the United States.

"I also discovered that racial discrimination extends to this sector as well, where blacks and indigenous people get paid less than white Anglo-Americans," he noted.

Imperial Immunity contains accounts of numerous abductions perpetrated by the CIA, dozens of fights that have passed through Spanish airports, and copious documentation from the Bush administration.

It also includes reports on international investigations carried out in the United States, Pentagon memos and circulars, and responses from legal advisors consulted on how to apply certain "interrogation techniques" or deny detainees protection under the Geneva Conventions without running afoul of the country's own federal courts or the International Criminal Court. (END/2005)

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Seized, held, tortured: six tell same tale

Ian Cobain
Tuesday December 6, 2005
The Guardian

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Mamdouh Habib, 49, an Australian citizen, was caught up in the rendition system after being arrested near the Pakistani-Afghan border shortly after the 9/11 attacks. His lawyers say he was bundled aboard a small jet by men speaking English with American accents and flown to Egypt, the country where he was born. For the next six months, they say, he was held in a Cairo jail, where he was hung from hooks, beaten, given shocks from an electric cattle prod, and told he was to be raped by dogs.

Habib also says that he was shackled and forced into three torture chambers: one filled with water up to his chin, requiring him to stand on tiptoe for hours, a second with a low ceiling and two feet of water, forcing him into a painful stoop, and a third with a few inches of water, and within sight of an electric generator which his captors said would be used to electrocute him. He made statements - which he has since withdrawn - declaring that he had helped train the 9/11 attackers in martial arts. Habib was moved to Afghanistan and then to Guantánamo. Last January he was released without charge and allowed to return to his wife and three children in Sydney.

Maher Arar, 34, a Canadian citizen, was seized in September 2002 while travelling through JFK airport in New York, on his way home after a holiday in Tunisia. After being questioned for 13 days about a terrorism suspect - the brother of a work colleague - he was handcuffed, placed in leg irons, and put aboard an executive jet. Hearing the crew describe themselves as members of the "special removals unit", and discovering he was bound for Syria, the country where he was born, he begged them to return to the US. The crew, he says, ignored his pleas and suggested he watch a spy film that was being shown on board. After landing in Jordan, Arar says he was driven to Syria, where he was held in a small underground cell which he likened to a grave. His hands were repeatedly whipped with cables, he says. He added that he would eventually confess to anything put to him. Arar was released a year later after the Canadian government took up his case. The Syrian ambassador in Washington announced that no terrorist links had been found. Arar is suing the US government.

Amnesty International has highlighted the plight of two Yemeni friends, **Salah Nasser Salim 'Ali**, 27, and **Muhammad Faraj Ahmed Bashmilah**, 37, arrested separately in August 2003. Salah was detained in

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Indonesia, then flown to Jordan, where Muhammad was already under arrest. They say they were hung upside down and beaten for several days, before being flown to an unknown country about four hours' flying distance.

Neither man knew that the other was under arrest, but both described being detained in solitary confinement in an old underground prison, staffed by masked American guards, where western music was played in their cells 24 hours a day. Both men say they were moved after eight months, spending around three hours in a small aircraft, and then a helicopter, before being taken to another underground prison, this time modern, with air conditioning and surveillance cameras in the cells. This too was run by Americans, they say. The two men were returned to Yemen last May, but remain in custody. Amnesty says Yemeni officials have said they are being held at the request of US authorities. "What we have heard from these two men is just one small part of the much broader picture of US secret detentions around the world," said Sharon Critoph, the Amnesty researcher who interviewed them in Yemen.

Ahmed Agiza, 43, a doctor, and **Muhammad Zery**, 36, were abducted in Stockholm in December 2001, with the connivance of the Swedish government. Both were seeking asylum in Sweden, and had been convicted in absentia of membership of a banned Islamist group in their native Egypt. Agiza admits knowing Ayman Zawahiri, Osama bin Laden's second-in-command, but says he severed all links many years ago and insists he has renounced violence.

According to evidence to a Swedish parliamentary inquiry last year, they were taken to Bromma airport, Stockholm, by uniformed Swedish police and Americans wearing suits. They were stripped, searched, sedated and dressed in boiler suits and hoods. They were shackled and bundled on to a Gulfstream 5 executive jet, before being flown to Cairo. This aircraft has flown in and out of the UK at least 60 times since December 2001, most recently with a new tail number. Senior Swedish police officers told the parliamentary inquiry the aircraft was operated by the CIA.

Both men later told relatives and Swedish diplomats that they were subjected to electric shock torture in Egypt. Zery was released from prison almost two years later. Agiza was jailed for 25 years, reduced to 15 on appeal.


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