

## NOT SIMPLY A FEW BAD APPLES...

**Soldiers shouldn't really need to be told not to torture their prisoners, but let's be clear - under international law, torture is outlawed in times of war and times of peace.**

Article 75 of the *Geneva Conventions* states that **"murder, torture of all kinds, whether physical or mental, corporal punishment and mutilation... are and shall remain prohibited... whether committed by civilian or military agents."** The *UN Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman and Degrading Treatment or Punishment* and the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* clearly prohibit torture. In addition, using force to gain information from suspects is prohibited under Article 31 of the 4th *Geneva Convention*, although our government seems prepared to turn a conveniently blind eye to such practices so long as the torture isn't actually taking place on British soil.



*British rulers have long approved of torture. This illustration shows the torture and execution of alleged witch Mary Sutton of Bedfordshire in 1613.*

We reported in Issue 8 of WPJN on the torture of prisoners at Abu Ghraib prison by US soldiers and contractors. More recently, the mistreatment of prisoners by UK forces has come under the spotlight with the Court Martial in Osnabruck of three British soldiers accused of torturing Iraqi captives. The three were found guilty by the Court Martial in February; all were dishonourably discharged from the Army and received sentences of between five months and two years.

This is not the only case of torture and abuse of Iraqi civilians by British forces, with at least another 18 British soldiers facing Court Martial for such offences. In December, the High Court ruled that there must be a full independent inquiry into the death in September 2003 of 26-year-old Iraqi citizen Baha Mousa at the hands of British troops in Basra. Mousa was working as a hotel receptionist when British troops stormed the building and arrested seven men, who were allegedly hooded and tortured. Two days later, Mousa was dead. An International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) report on the case stated that the detainees including Mousa were *"made to kneel, face and hands against the ground, as if in a prayer position... The soldiers stamped on the backs of the necks of those raising their head."* Mousa died and two others detained with him were hospitalised. When an ICRC doctor examined the injured Iraqis in hospital a week later, he observed that their severe injuries were *"consistent with their accounts of beatings."*

We can only guess at how many other similar cases there are, but it's safe to say that only a tiny fraction will ever be brought to trial. Last year, armed forces minister Adam Ingram tried to deny that there were even any reports of abuse by British forces in Iraq. Using doubts over the authenticity of photographs published by *The Mirror* as a smokescreen, the government attempted to divert attention from the real evidence. When the ICRC and Amnesty International refused to keep quiet about their respective reports which detailed such abuse, the government was eventually forced to admit that there were cases to answer, but continues to claim that these are a few isolated incidents of torture by maverick soldiers.

Commenting on the Osnabruck Court Martial, Tony Blair said on 20th January: *"The difference between democracy and tyranny is not that in a democracy bad things do not happen but that in a democracy, when they do happen, people are held and brought to account, and that is what is happening under our judicial system."* Of course, the people being "brought to account" in these cases are individual soldiers. What of the high-ranking officers who must have known about, colluded with and possibly ordered the beatings? What of the person who is ultimately responsible for British involvement in the illegal invasion and occupation of Iraq - Tony Blair himself? No bringing to account there.

British soldiers involved in "intelligence work" are routinely trained in torture techniques. Some are subjected to these techniques themselves during training to learn how to resist such treatment if captured. This "R2I" (resistance to interrogation) training includes being kept naked, subjected to noise torture, deprived of dignity and of basic human needs such as sleep, warmth, food and water... just the sort of torture which British forces seem to have carried out in Iraq.

A former British special forces officer recently returned from Iraq claims that soldiers subjected to such training methods understand the devastating effects of torture and develop empathy with torture victims. He blames the situation in Iraq's prisons and detention camps on private contractors and soldiers who have not undergone such training and who use the techniques indiscriminately without realising the suffering caused. Whether or not this is true, and it's hard to accept that the perpetrators could be oblivious to the results of their actions, all the evidence points to the torture being sanctioned by those in command, who have absolutely no excuse for allowing, or as seems probable, ordering such practices. The International Committee of the Red Cross comments in its report on Iraq under occupation that *"the use of ill treatment against persons deprived of their liberty went beyond exceptional cases and might be considered as a practice tolerated by the coalition forces."*

Robert Fisk, reporter for *The Independent*, describes an Army indifferent to injustice and suffering, and a catalogue of abuses which goes beyond anything which could be described as isolated incidents: *"Rereading my notebooks of post-invasion Iraq, I find they are filled with stories of other Baha Mousas: an old man from Fallujah who died of ill-treatment and ended up on a slab at Abu Ghraib, of cruel beatings in the same prison, of almost countless innocent Iraqis shot down by trigger-happy*

## ... BRITISH ARMY ROTTEN TO THE CORE

*American - and British - soldiers... the malaise of almost reckless apathy in the face of such injustice which contaminates so many armies, including our own... It's now far too late to right all the wrongs we have done in Iraq. Just don't ask why 'they' hate us."*

Appeal Court Judge Stephen Sedley, reviewing two books about Abu Ghraib in *The Guardian* (5th March) comments that "Perhaps the strongest evidence that the abuse of prisoners in US hands has been systemic, not aberrant, is the simplest: it is the fact that those involved felt it was quite safe to be photographed repeatedly while committing it. Personnel who fear disciplinary reprisal, or even disapproval, do not usually make a visual record of their conduct." These comments apply equally to abuses carried out by British soldiers.

The long and shameful history of torture perpetrated by British forces in other occupied territories should make us even more suspicious of any claims that such crimes are carried out by a few "bad apples" in an Army which is otherwise beyond reproach.

A nineteenth century correspondent wrote of the British Army in India under colonial rule: "There is no army in Europe or America with so much brutality as the British. Plundering, violence, massacre – things that everywhere else are strictly and completely banished – are a time-honoured privilege, a vested right of the British soldier."

Over 50,000 Mau Mau freedom fighters in Kenya were tortured and murdered by the British colonial army in the 1950s. From documents recently released under the new Freedom of Information Act, we now officially know that the General commanding the British Army in Kenya at the time was well aware of what was going on. In a confidential letter to the War Office, General George Erskine wrote that "there was a great deal of indiscriminate shooting by army and police. I am quite certain prisoners were beaten to extract information."

Another set of recently released documents reveals that British forces in Northern Ireland in the 1970s practised what were known as "deep interrogation" techniques. IRA suspects were subjected to torture which included hooding, being forced to stand for hours in painful, stretched positions, "white noise" fed through headphones, and sleep, food and water deprivation. Those who protested or who refused to maintain their forced positions were beaten. In 1976, the British government was found guilty of using "torture, inhumane and degrading treatment" in Northern Ireland by the European Court of Human Rights, and was forced to pay compensation to some of its victims, which it did grudgingly after concluding that there was no way to sidestep this obligation.

The Islamic Human Rights Commission (IHRC) sees occupation by countries for their own ends as inevitably resulting in abuse and torture. In a statement issued on January 19th 2005, the Commission said:

*"IHRC today condemns in the strongest terms the abuse and torture of Iraqi prisoners by British occupation troops. Reports of such torture by both American and British occupation troops have been widespread*

*throughout the region, yet have been categorically denied by both governments.*

*"The gruesome images released today constitute a damning indictment of the occupation of Iraq. Hitherto, the British government have distanced themselves from the torture committed by American troops. Today, it is obvious that nationality is irrelevant when it comes to human rights abuses; where there is occupation for self-interest, there will inevitably be abuse... **Only an immediate end to the occupation can ensure an end to the abuse.**"*



*Protest outside one of the bases where British soldiers learn all about torture*

Ghazwan Al-Mukhtar, an Iraqi citizen from Baghdad, sent an open letter to George Bush in March 2005. It is a powerful and damning summary of torture in Iraq since the occupation, and a fitting, if somewhat depressing, conclusion to this article. He writes:

*"More than a year ago you promised the Iraqi people that 'the torture chambers and the secret police are gone forever.' Mr. President, I honestly wanted to believe you then. I discovered later that your American soldiers were torturing the Iraqi people since May 2003. I discovered also that your army generals knew about it and wrote reports to their higher authorities about such abuses of human rights. I will give you, Mr. President, the benefit of the doubt and say that your advisors did not tell you the facts.*

*"Having known the facts, you did not apologise for the victims of the American torture but went ahead putting the blame on only the 'seven bad apples'. That did not STOP the torture or the human rights violations committed by your troops in Iraq. Reports are still coming to date confirming that torture is being committed against the Iraqis in the American detention camps...*

*"Your partners in the 'coalition of willing' are not doing any better! The British and Danish armies are both torturing Iraqi detainees. Now we discover through human rights reports that the 'new Iraqi army', created and trained by your government, is also torturing the Iraqis. It is clear to me, Mr. President, that while we were tortured, before the 'liberation', by one force of evil, now we are being tortured by at least four evil forces after the 'liberation'. It looks to me, Mr. President, that contrary to your announcement, the 'torture chambers' may truly be here forever."*