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Afghanistan: Iraqi Prisoner Scandal Shines Light On Treatment Of Afghan Detainees

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Reports and photographs of Iraqi prisoner abuse by U.S. soldiers have raised concern about the treatment of detainees being held in Afghanistan. Human rights groups long ago expressed such concern to Washington after similar reports of mistreatment began to surface.

Washington, 12 May 2004 (RFE/RL) -- The U.S. military says it is investigating allegations that an Afghan police officer was abused and subjected to humiliating photographs while detained on a U.S. base.

In an interview with "The New York Times" today, police officer Sayyed Nabi Siddiqi says he was falsely accused of being a member of the Taliban last summer and spent some 40 days in detention at various U.S. bases in Afghanistan. He alleges he was subjected to beatings, sleep deprivation, and sexual abuse. Siddiqi said he was repeatedly photographed naked by his U.S. captors, like the Iraqi prisoners at the Abu Ghurayb prison.

Siddiqi was released without charge. The U.S. Embassy in Kabul issued a statement today saying the U.S. military is investigating the case.

Afghan and international human rights groups say they have been investigating similar complaints about the U.S. treatment of Afghan detainees, long before the scandal over Iraqi prisoners surfaced.

The Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission says it has received 44 complaints in recent months against various actions by U.S. forces. It says its most recent request for access to Afghan detainees in U.S. custody -- a request prompted by the Iraqi scandal -- was turned down.

The commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, Lieutenant General David Barno, said yesterday there would be no change in policy on access to prisoners held in U.S. custody in Afghanistan. He said only representatives of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) are permitted to visit them.

The ICRC's spokeswoman in Afghanistan, Jessica Barry, told RFE/RL yesterday that her organization

regularly visits U.S. detention facilities in Afghanistan. However, she refused to comment on the treatment of detainees, referring to the ICRC's policy of confidentiality.

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The New York-based Human Rights Watch says it, too, has expressed concern over the treatment of prisoners in Afghanistan and has asked to visit U.S. detentions centers in the country.

John Sifton, the Afghanistan researcher at Human Rights Watch, said some detainees who were released from U.S. custody told HRW they had been mistreated: "We reported before this scandal broke in Iraq that there were serious concerns about the way U.S. forces were arresting and detaining prisoners in Afghanistan. We have serious allegations from early, early, early in the conflict from 2001 and 2002 that prisoners captured in Afghanistan were beaten severely, stripped naked, [and] exposed to cold temperatures by U.S. forces. This was in many ways early warning signs to the U.S. military that it has problems detaining prisoners taken on the battlefield, but what we now know is that those lessons were not learned."

He said HRW continues to receive such complaints.

In March, the organization released a 59-page report about alleged abuses by U.S. forces in Afghanistan. The report concluded that U.S. forces operating in Afghanistan had arbitrarily detained civilians, used excessive force during arrests of noncombatants, and mistreated detainees.

Sifton told RFE/RL that some allegations of mistreatment have been made by U.S. military personnel themselves: "There are members of the U.S. military who are concerned about what the U.S. intelligence and military service is doing, and they have leaked information to us about those problems."

HRW called on the United States to investigate and publicly report on allegations of mistreatment at its detention facilities in Afghanistan and to instruct military and intelligence personal to take steps to prevent or stop abuses.

Sifton believes the U.S. should give human rights groups access to detention centers in Afghanistan.

"The U.S. military has ignored all of the requests we made to visit detention sites in Afghanistan. We very much urge them to do so now because it harms their credibility and the credibility of [Afghan Transitional Administration Chairman Hamid] Karzai," Sifton said.

Barno, the commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, acknowledged that the military has been looking into what he called "challenges and problems" at its holding facilities in Afghanistan.

He said military authorities are investigating allegations of abuse, including three deaths.

In December, Amnesty International criticized the U.S. military for not disclosing the status of investigations into the deaths of two Afghans who died at Bagram, the main U.S. base in Afghanistan, in 2002. Their deaths have been listed as homicides by the U.S. military.

According to HRW, another Afghan detainee died at a U.S. air base in eastern Afghanistan in 2003.

The reason for his death is not clear.

U.S. officials say about 300 Afghans suspected of having ties to the Taliban, Al-Qaeda, or other insurgent groups are being held in detention at Bagram. An unknown number of others are being held at eight to 10 other sites across the country.