

Christian group reported Iraqi prison abuse: Christian Peacemaker Teams

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Nearly four months before the publication of photos of Iraqi detainees abused by their coalition captors, a small Christian peace organization issued a report detailing incidents similar to those now sparking outcries from North America to the Middle East.

The Chicago-based Christian Peacemaker Teams—a Brethren, Mennonite and Quaker organization that has had a presence in Baghdad since October of 2002—issued a report in January covering cases of 72 detainees and addressing coalition raids on Iraqi homes, damage to and confiscation of personal property and the treatment of detainees. CPT workers in Baghdad spent seven months last year interviewing detainees and their families and investigating their claims.

“So many detainees were showing up at our door, and no one was really working at it,” said CPT director Gene Stoltzfus, who has been to Iraq twice in the past six months. In a personal meeting in late January, CPT members presented the report to Colonel Mark Warren, a high-ranking legal officer in the office of General Ricardo Sanchez, commander of U.S. forces in Iraq. Several weeks later, CPT members also met with Richard Jones, a deputy to coalition administrator Paul Bremer.

The report was positively received, said CPT member Cliff Kindy, who attended both meetings. But neither Warren nor Jones raised expectations for addressing detainee issues. “They were clear: bureaucracy takes a long time to move,” said Kindy, who concluded a second five-month Baghdad assignment in March.

Since then, abuses at Abu Ghraib prison have come to light, underscoring CPT’s earlier findings. In an effort to stem the negative publicity from the still-unfolding story, President Bush has appeared on Arab television to denounce—but not apologize for—the mistreatment. In addition, the Pentagon has widened its investigation of the treatment of detainees and prisoners to include the deaths of 25 Iraqis and Afghans while in U.S. custody.

(In another revelation, a confidential Red Cross report given to the Bush administration earlier this year said that coalition military intelligence officials estimated that 70 to 90 percent of prisoners detained in Iraq since the war began last year “had been arrested by mistake.” And the report described in detail a range of prisoner abuses that it said U.S. officials had failed to stop despite repeated complaints from the International Committee of the Red Cross. The Swiss-based ICRC made 29 visits to coalition-run prisons and camps between late March and November last year. Portions of the report were published the first week in May, but the *Los Angeles Times* reported on the full report May 11.)

In a devastating indictment, the Christian Peacemakers report said: “The common sentiment is that the coalition treatment of detainees is as bad as, if not worse than, treatment under the Hussein regime. Certainly these problems are exaggerated in rumors, but CPT reports show that detention conditions are deplorable at best.”

Among CPT’s findings:

- 21 incidents of beatings with hands, feet and objects such as a riflebutt.
- 11 incidents of denying detainees access to water.
- Ten incidents of handcuffing a detainee’s hands behind the back for more than three hours.
- Seven incidents of forcing a detainee to kneel for more than two consecutive hours.
- Four incidents of excessively tight handcuffing, so that detainees’ hands immediately were swollen, went numb or were lacerated.
- Four incidents of exposing detainees to sunlight for more than three hours, resulting in burns, dehydration and/or heat exhaustion.

One detainee told CPT that while in custody at a coalition military base in Baghdad, his hands were kept tied behind his back for two days, and he received two glasses of water and two spoonfuls of food. He was also repeatedly beaten and even had a toenail pried off. He twice saw soldiers who were allegedly doctors, one of whom beat him and the other of whom “examined me by listening to loud music and dancing for a while.” The detainee later attempted suicide before being released after nearly three months.

A 16-year-old boy told of being incarcerated with other family members. When his brother asked for water, he was gagged and beaten by the guards. "My brother screamed in pain," he was quoted as saying. "We also screamed in protest and to encourage him to scream so they would stop this abuse. We were then beaten also . . . in the neck, back and behind." He said the entire time he was in custody he had nothing on but his underwear, because he had been apprehended while sleeping at home. "We could have told more gruesome stories than we told [in the report]," Stoltzfus said. "We tried to err on the modest side."

He said CPT heard reports of naked prisoners and sexual abuse but chose not to publicize them because of fears of accusations of sensationalism. "We're not sure if we should have pushed that question harder," Stoltzfus said. Detainees were usually apprehended without explanation by coalition forces. Of the 72 cases investigated by CPT, none of the prisoners involved has been allowed legal counsel, had a trial or been convicted of a crime.

Stoltzfus said he visited with one detainee who was held for six months but was interrogated for only half an hour during that time. Another was not interrogated at all before his release, even though the soldiers who apprehended him alleged that he was linked to al-Qaeda. Kindy said coalition military and civilian authorities admitted that they were so "overwhelmed by what happened after the war that there were no systems in place to deal with detainees."

CPT's report, in addition to addressing the situation of the detainees, also noted Iraqis' growing resentment of the coalition. "They feel betrayed by coalition leaders who promised an end to totalitarianism and a new future of freedom, democracy and justice, yet who—according to these Iraqis' perception—seem to act just as secretly, dishonestly and unsympathetically as Saddam," the report stated. *-Rich Preheim, Religion News Service*