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## Human Rights Group Alleges U.S. has Failed to Curb Torture of Detainees

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May 3, 2006

LONDON (AP) - The United States has failed to eradicate "widespread" torture of prisoners in its war on terrorism despite the outcry from the Abu Ghraib scandal and abusive behavior at U.S. detention facilities in Cuba and Afghanistan, Amnesty International charged Wednesday.

The London-based human rights group made its criticism in a report to the U.N. Committee Against Torture, which is meeting in Geneva this week to consider American compliance with the U.N. convention against torture and other cruel forms of punishment.

"Evidence continues to emerge of widespread torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment of detainees held in U.S. custody in Afghanistan, **Guantanamo Bay**, Cuba, Iraq and other locations," the report said.

Amnesty International charged that no senior American officials have been held accountable for incidents of torture or ill-treatment and said legislation passed by Congress in 2005 has "serious limitations."

One section of that law, the group said, refers to "cruel, unusual and inhumane treatment" banned under the U.S. Constitution as defined by a series of reservations the United States has expressed regarding the U.N. Convention against Torture.

The law is a step forward but still could leave the United States open to employ a narrower interpretation of what constitutes such treatment than is recognized under the convention, Amnesty said, adding that the United States should withdraw its reservations to the convention.

"Although the U.S. government continues to assert its condemnation of torture and ill-treatment, these statements contradict what is happening in practice," said Curt Goering, senior deputy executive director of Amnesty International USA.

"The U.S. government is not only failing to take steps to eradicate torture. It is actually creating a climate in which torture and other ill-treatment can flourish -- including by trying to narrow the definition of torture," he said.

The U.N. committee will question U.S. officials starting Friday on issues ranging from Washington's interpretation of the absolute ban on torture to its interrogation methods in prisons such as those at Abu Ghraib in Iraq and **Guantanamo Bay**.

The United States, like the 140 other nations that have signed the U.N. convention, must submit reports to the committee to show it is applying the rules.

The U.N. human rights watchdog has expressed concern over domestic U.S. violations of the U.N. torture convention, including use of excessive force by police and electroshock weapons and abuses against women in the prison system. The latter allegedly include sexual abuse by male guards and shackling of women while pregnant and in labor.

In Afghanistan, which U.S. forces invaded a few months after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks to oust the Taliban for harboring al-Qaida militants, hundreds of detainees remain in U.S. custody with no recourse to due legal process or human rights protection, Amnesty said.

There is no longer an international armed conflict in Afghanistan, nor is there a clear or recognized legal framework governing U.S. forces actions in that country, Amnesty said.

In the cases of both Afghanistan and Iraq, the United States has reportedly improved its procedures for handling prisoners since the scandal at Abu Ghraib. But Amnesty said it continues to receive reports of torture or ill-treatment of detainees by U.S. troops.

Reported abuses involve alleged use of stun guns on handcuffed and blindfolded detainees in Iraq in March 2005 and hooding, shackling and deprivation of food and water at least up until March 2005 in Afghanistan, the report said.

The U.S. mission to the U.N.'s European headquarters in Geneva said it has sent a written reply to the committee's questions, but that it would refrain from commenting ahead of its sessions Friday and Monday.

In its 87-page report filed in January, some four years behind schedule, Washington insisted it is "unequivocally opposed" to torture and that its commitment to the ban "remains unchanged" since the U.S. Senate ratified the convention in October 1994.

But the U.N. committee, a panel of 10 independent experts who meet twice a year, said U.S. legal interpretation of torture in Justice Department memorandums in 2002 and 2004 "seems to be much more restrictive than previous United Nations standards."

The committee is demanding the United States explain the establishment of alleged secret prisons, its rules and methods of interrogation, and whether the Bush administration assumes responsibility for alleged acts of torture committed by American agents outside U.S. territory.

"In view of the numerous allegations of torture and ill-treatment of persons in detention under the jurisdiction of (the United States) and the case of the Abu Ghraib prison, what specific measures have been taken to identify and remedy problems in the command and operation of those detention facilities?" the committee asked.

It also questioned more specifically whether there has been any "independent investigation regarding the possible responsibility of the high-ranking officials of the administration, including the CIA, the Department of Defense, the Department of Justice and the armed forces, for authorizing or consenting in any way" to acts of torture.

Criticism by the U.N. panel brings no penalties beyond international scrutiny. The committee is expected to issue conclusions when it wraps up its session May 19.

Washington 's report said President Bush "has made clear that the United States stands against and will not tolerate torture under any circumstances."

It noted that it has a separate system of military justice for its armed forces personnel, which is responsible for handling claims of abuse from detainees in Afghanistan, Iraq and **Guantanamo Bay**. Allegations concerning CIA activities are being reviewed by the agency's inspector general, the report said.

"When allegations of abuses arise, they in all cases will be investigated and, if substantiated, prosecuted," the report said.

Washington neither confirms nor denies allegations of secret prisons on grounds that it refuses to comment on intelligence matters.

The committee cautioned that enforced disappearances of suspects "can be considered a form of torture" and asked for details on the U.S. policy of "rendition."

U.S. officials have acknowledged flying up to 150 of the most serious suspected terrorists from one country to another, but said they receive "diplomatic assurances" from authorities that they won't use torture on the detainees they receive.

But rights groups allege some have been tortured anyway.