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State Dept. Study Cites Torture of Prisoners

Rumsfeld Approved Similar Practices

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Washington Post
March 1, 2005;

The State Department's annual human rights report released yesterday criticized countries for a range of interrogation practices it labeled as torture, including sleep deprivation for detainees, confining prisoners in contorted positions, stripping and blindfolding them and threatening them with dogs -- methods similar to those approved at times by the Bush administration for use on detainees in U.S. custody.

Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld approved in December 2002 a number of severe measures, including the stripping of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and using dogs to frighten them. He later rescinded those tactics and signed off on a shorter list of "exceptional techniques," including 20-hour interrogations, face slapping, stripping detainees to create "a feeling of helplessness and dependence," and using dogs to increase anxiety.

The State Department report also harshly attacked the treatment of prisoners in such countries as Syria and Egypt, where the United States has shipped terrorism suspects under a practice known as "rendition." An Australian citizen has alleged that under Egyptian detention he was hung by his arms from hooks, repeatedly shocked, nearly drowned and brutally beaten. Most of his fingernails were missing when he later arrived at Guantanamo Bay.

Bush administration officials have said they never intend for captives to be tortured and seek pledges from foreign governments that they will treat detainees humanely.

Human rights advocates said yesterday the widespread reports of harsh interrogation techniques by the U.S. military and the CIA during the war on terrorism have undermined the moral authority of the United States to comment on human rights abuses in other parts of the world.

Tom Malinowski, Washington advocacy director of Human Rights Watch, said autocrats can now push back and assert that the tactics criticized by the State Department are routinely used by the United States. "Throughout the debate on detainee abuses, the administration has been in denial about the international consequences of the legal decisions that have been made in the terrorism context," he said.

Michael Kozak, acting assistant secretary of state for democracy, human rights and labor, said President Bush "has been very clear on the issue of torture, which is we are against it -- and torture by anyone's common-sense definition of it, not some fancy definition."

But he acknowledged that the events at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq in particular "were a stain on the honor" of the United States. "As we say to people, no country has a perfect human rights record, and certainly not the United States. We have problems, too, not just overseas but policemen here abuse prisoners. It happens. We've seen some great cases of this over the past few years."

Kozak said the question "is not whether you have human rights abuses; it's what you do about them when they occur." He noted that soldiers who abused prisoners at Abu Ghraib are being court-martialed, and the tactics used at Guantanamo "have now been challenged in our courts, and successfully challenged in our courts."

In the lengthy report, the State Department described as torture the interrogation techniques of a number of key U.S. allies that appeared similar to the accusations involving U.S. detainees -- though in many cases the other countries also used more extreme methods.

In Egypt, the report said, the police and intelligence service stripped and blindfolded victims and doused them with cold water. Tunisia was accused of using sleep deprivation and submerging the head in water, a technique known as "water boarding" -- rumored to have been used in some detentions of terrorism suspects. Saudi Arabia was reported to have used sleep deprivation, along with beatings and whippings.

Libya, which has resumed diplomatic contacts with the United States, would chain prisoners to a wall for hours and threaten to attack them with dogs -- part of a menu of torture that included applying electric shock, pouring lemon juice on wounds, and breaking fingers and letting them heal without medical care.

Iran and North Korea, both labeled part of an "axis of evil" by Bush, also used techniques similar to those employed in U.S. terrorism detentions. Iran favored prolonged solitary confinement with sensory deprivation, long confinement in contorted positions and sleep deprivation. The "methods of torture" used in North Korea included severe beatings, prolonged periods of exposure, public nakedness and being forced to stand up and sit down to the point of collapse, the report said.