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Network of Shame

Editorial
The Baltimore Sun
November 6, 2005

Four years ago, the CIA didn't have a network of black-hole prisons holding at least 100 people indefinitely. The agency and the U.S. government weren't putting America's allies in the awkward position of playing host to U.S. agents breaking international laws, such as those against holding prisoners without charges, without notice, without end.

Now the spy agency has been outed as operator of a network of penal colonies, answerable to no one, and the argument within the U.S. administration is not over the morality or legality of holding "disappeared" prisoners but the logistics of it. This has gone too far.

It is un-American to deny anyone freedom without due process. It is against U.S. and international law to torture or abuse prisoners. It is illegal to deny the International Red Cross access to prisoners - or even the knowledge that there are prisoners.

There might be extreme exceptions, such as to thwart an imminent attack on civilians, and the CIA is the agency likeliest to push those boundaries. But it isn't the CIA's job to detain and interrogate people - it had more effective means to get information, its agents say. It is the military's job to hold prisoners, although the armed forces have had their own problems following basic rules of conduct. And as with the military's prisoners at Guantanamo Bay, the CIA's collection includes people who might not have any ties to terrorism at all.

It is far past time for Congress and other Americans to rein this in. Legislators must pass - immediately - the ban on "cruel, inhuman or degrading punishment" that is attached to a military spending bill. The Senate's Select Committee on Intelligence must demand details from CIA Director Porter J. Goss, including when all these overseas prisons will be shut down. If any country housing one of these prisons truly didn't know it was there, the United States should apologize for this breach of trust.

In the 1980s, CIA agents told insurgents in Afghanistan to treat their captives humanely, arguing rightly that the Soviets they were fighting then would do the same to Afghans. The agency - and this country - should follow its own advice.