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Torture akin to terror

Editorial
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Even some defense attorneys doubted the horror stories their clients told them about the interrogation tactics at the Guantanamo Bay prison. Then human rights groups sued for government documents, and reports from FBI agents confirmed the worst claims of abuse.

The recently released FBI accounts describe often-sadistic treatment of detainees — chaining prisoners in the fetal position for hours, leaving them in their own feces and urine, threatening them with growling dogs. Sleep deprivation and exposure to extreme temperatures were commonplace. What the FBI agents witnessed parallels the complaints filed in federal courts by more than 60 of the 550 men still detained. The Pentagon had no trouble dismissing the prisoners' stories as fiction, but assailing the credibility of the FBI is another matter. The government's own papers substantiate the government's abuses.

A Pentagon spokesman said the military is investigating the torture reports and taking allegations seriously. But other documents newly released detail similar abuses by military personnel in Iraq that occurred even after the Abu Ghraib prison scandal became public. The FBI reports are further evidence of systematic violations of the Geneva Conventions that were widespread and concerted. Dozens of detainees have died in Iraq, with little or no investigation of the reasons. Other reports describe how the Central Intelligence Agency used private jets to transport detainees to other countries for torture. The FBI papers expose the Pentagon's defense that the disgrace at Abu Ghraib was the isolated aberrance of a few low-ranking soldiers as the implausible cover story it always was. This is only the latest example of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's version of a reality that does not exist. According to the FBI accounts, the Guantanamo interrogators believed they acted with the secretary's blessing.

The Pentagon's record in identifying Al-Qaeda and Taliban terrorists for detention at the base is suspect in itself. After insisting for two years that the prison's population was made up of dangerous jihadi militants, the government has released hundreds to their homelands with little more than a never-mind. We never will know how many became victims of torture after military commanders made them victims of circumstance.

The abuses seriously damage the U.S. struggle against terror, in Iraq and around the globe. A strategy of denial and coverup makes the impact worse. So does the failure to hold any policymakers accountable.

Until now, Congress has reacted to the torture charges with indifference and deference to the Bush administration. Were it not for the intercession of the courts, Americans still would believe their government always is committed to upholding human rights and following international law. It's up to Congress to lay out the disturbing truth for the nation once and for all.