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U.S. condemns human rights violations

Helen THOMAS (Op-Ed)
The Oakland Tribune
March 7, 2005

NEVER LET IT BE said that the U.S. State Department lacks chutzpah.

The department recently issued its annual report on human rights practices of nations throughout the world, pointedly criticizing perennial violators as well as allies, including the U.S.-sponsored interim Iraqi government.

But the report doesn't discuss accusations of human rights abuses at the U.S. prisons in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba and Abu Ghraib, Iraq, where prisoners of war and terrorism suspects are held.

Curtis Cooper, a State Department spokesman, explained that the report does not indulge in self-criticism. It leaves it to others to call the U.S. hand.

"We don't report on ourselves," Cooper said, but he noted that the United States does report on its allies as well as nations with chronic human rights transgressions.

For example, the report detailed torture, rape, arbitrary arrests and illegal detentions by the Iraqi government.

"There are countries we support and that are friends, and when they have practices that don't meet international standards, we don't hesitate to call a spade a spade," Cooper said. He added that the Iraqis accepted the criticism and didn't deny the charges.

The report also listed the usual suspects, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Pakistan, North Korea and Iran, among other humans rights violators.

Here are some of the critiques:

- Saudi Arabia: Torture by its security forces, arbitrary arrests and incommunicado detentions;
- Egypt: Mistreatment of prisoners leading to 10 deaths;
- North Korea: Brutal and repressive treatment of its people.

Some nations were accused of torturing prisoners and inflicting them with sleep deprivation and blindfolding.

If that sounds familiar, it's probably because similar criticism has been levied against U.S. interrogators who were accused of punitive methods to create anxiety and fear. The torture took many forms, including "water boarding" that simulates drowning.

Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld approved a plan to allow "exceptional techniques" during 20-hour interrogations, including face slapping and stripping captives to create a feeling of helplessness and dependence and using dogs to create anxiety.

The American Civil Liberties Union and Human Rights First have filed a federal lawsuit on behalf of eight men who claim they were tortured in Iraq and Afghanistan under Rumsfeld's command.

During the last several months there also have been reports that the United States sends prisoners to countries where they will face tougher interrogation methods that would be outrageously illegal in the United States.

So far, we have not heard a mea culpa from Rumsfeld. Despite the shameful revelations, President Bush has yet to issue an ironclad executive order against torture or abusive treatment in military prisons.

At a White House briefing earlier this week, I asked press secretary Scott McClellan: "Has the president ever issued an order against torture of prisoners? And do we still send prisoners to Syria to be tortured?"

McClellan replied: "The president has stated publicly that we do not condone torture and that he would never authorize the use of torture. He has made that (clear)."

"But has he issued an order?"

McClellan didn't give a clear response.

The president made a "statement very publicly and he's made it very clear to everybody in the government that we do not condone torture," he replied.

McClellan refused to say whether U.S. prisoners are shipped out to other countries for harsher treatment.

On his recent trip to Europe, Bush had a highly publicized meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Bush reportedly complained that Moscow had been backsliding on democracy and curbing individual liberties.

Putin's public response was restrained but he could have said: "Look who's talking."