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## US disclosures signal wider detainee abuse

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WASHINGTON -- A trove of government disclosures forced by a Freedom of Information Act lawsuit has signaled that the abuse of detainees in Iraq and at the US naval base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, was much broader than the Bush administration has portrayed it since the Abu Ghraib prison scandal became public this spring.

A heavily redacted internal e-mail from an FBI agent in June, for example, reported hearing of "numerous serious physical abuse incidents of Iraqi civilian detainees . . . strangulation, beatings, placement of lit cigarettes into the detainees' ear openings, and unauthorized interrogations" and refers to "coverup efforts."

Another FBI agent wrote in an e-mail in August of witnessing an interrogation in Guantanamo:

"The A/C had been turned off, making the temperature in the unventilated room probably well over 100 degrees," the report said. "The detainee was almost unconscious on the floor, with a pile of hair next to him. He had apparently been literally pulling his own hair out throughout the night."

Thousands of pages of documents, including two sets of FBI reports made public in the past week, have been released since October in response to a suit filed by the American Civil Liberties Union and other rights groups.

The documents suggest that severe mistreatment was far more widespread than previously known and that there may have been higher-level authorization by Bush administration officials for a policy of aggressive interrogation tactics. The White House last week again denied that anyone authorized torture and pledged to investigate the new allegations.

Because the e-mails and memos recounting scenes of abuse were written by government officials -- largely FBI agents appalled by interrogation practices they found unprofessional and counterproductive -- the disclosures lend greater credibility to prior claims of abuse by former detainees, according to an advocate for the detainees.

"This is really disturbing and frightening," Khalid al-Odah, father of a Guantanamo detainee, said in a phone interview from Kuwait City. He says his son went to Pakistan to teach the Koran just before the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, and was later sold into detention under false pretenses by villagers seeking a bounty for Al Qaeda members.

"Before the FBI reports, we did not take these stories from the [human rights] organizations and released detainees as full fact," Odah said. "We thought maybe there was some exaggerating, or they are not sure about what is happening exactly. Now we don't have any doubt."

The disclosures also fill in details of what occurred at critical moments in the story of how the administration's detention and interrogation policies adopted after the Sept. 11 attacks led to a downward spiral in how detainees were treated.

Faced with a need to gain greater human intelligence about Al Qaeda plans but stymied by provisions in the Geneva Conventions that prohibit coercive interrogations of prisoners of war, the administration announced in February 2002 that the conventions would not cover treatment of Taliban and Al Qaeda detainees captured in Afghanistan.

At Guantanamo, Major General Geoffrey Miller established a positive-rewards system for detainees who cooperated. But by fall 2002, questions arose about what pressures could be brought against those who did not. In April 2003, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld signed off on techniques including loud music, temperature changes, stress positions, and isolation.

The FBI memos have done two things to broaden public understanding of what occurred at this stage to detainees captured in Afghanistan and held at the naval base. First, they demonstrate that service members also used growling dogs to frighten detainees at Guantanamo, something the military had denied. Second, they have rendered vivid that, in practice, the options amounted to physical and sensory assault.

"These documents that describe particular interrogations witnessed by FBI agents are useful because in the past, when we have talked about 'stress and duress' and hooding or loud music, it's been sterile," said Jameel Jaffer, an ACLU staff attorney. "People don't understand how these things work in practice -- what it means to bombard someone with loud music for a long time."

A vivid FBI e-mail, which recounted the detainee who pulled his hair out, also describes sessions in which detainees were chained in a fetal position with no food or water for 24 hours or more, causing them to urinate and defecate on themselves.

During one prolonged period, the room temperature was set so low that a barefoot detainee shook with cold. Another time the unventilated room was made "unbearably hot" while "extremely loud rap music" blasted a detainee for more than a day, the agent said.

Another FBI agent reported in July 2004: "I saw another detainee sitting on the floor of the interview room with an Israeli flag draped around him, loud music being played, and a strobe light flashing."

And two FBI reports from Guantanamo also present possible new evidence of higher responsibility for authorizing abuses. A e-mail from last December protests about Defense Department interrogators impersonating FBI officers at Guantanamo.

"If this detainee is . . . released or his story made public in any way, DOD interrogators will not be held accountable because these torture techniques were done [by] the 'FBI' interrogators," the FBI agent wrote in December 2003.

Then, an e-mail from January 2004 discussing the sessions in which interrogators impersonated FBI agents -- but which itself does not use the phrase "torture techniques" -- connects the practice to the second-highest official at the Pentagon, Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz: "Once again, this technique, and all of those used in these scenarios, was approved by the Dep Sec Def."

The Pentagon has denied that Wolfowitz approved interrogation techniques of any kind, although it says Rumsfeld approved the tactic of impersonation.

The other sets of e-mails provide greater clarity about what has occurred in Iraq.

In August 2003, as the insurgency in Iraq was gaining strength, the Pentagon sent Miller to Abu Ghraib to offer advice on gaining more intelligence from prisoners. He gave them a set of Guantanamo's procedures and suggested guards should "set the conditions" for successful interrogations, but noted that the Geneva Conventions applied to Iraq.

The Abu Ghraib abuses, which included beatings and the sexual humiliation of prisoners, began shortly after Miller's visit. The Pentagon later said that in giving his advice, Miller meant only passive tasks like watching who prisoners talked with, not abusing detainees to soften them up. It blamed a few rogue sadists among the guard force who have since faced prosecution.

The newly disclosed memos indicated incidents of abuse were more widespread than Abu Ghraib and continued into this year. But they have not indicated any further systematic use of sexual humiliation.

A typical example: Last summer, two Defense Intelligence Agency interrogators saw members of a special forces task force "punch a prisoners in the face to the point that the individual needed medical attention." They told a task force supervisors, but were "threatened," ordered not to talk about it, and had their photos of the beaten prisoner confiscated.

A document indicated that an FBI official thought President Bush had personally authorized some aggressive interrogation techniques in Iraq, a charge the White House denies.

A May e-mail from an FBI commander in Baghdad makes repeated references to a presidential order allegedly authorizing military interrogators to use techniques such as sleep deprivation, hooding, and stress positions.

"The things our personnel witnessed (but did not participate in) were authorized by the President under his Executive Order," the FBI agent wrote.

The White House denies such an order exists. If it does and was issued before the Abu Ghraib abuses, such a directive would contradict the government's account that the interrogation policy went no higher than the top US commander in Iraq, Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez.

"We need more information, but there is evidence here of high-up approval of these techniques," said Jaffer, from the ACLU. "This is the first we've heard about the existence of this type of order."

Bush and Pentagon officials have repeatedly denied authorizing torture. Last week, reacting to the new disclosures, the administration pledged once again to investigate what had happened.

"If there is abuse that occurs, we expect it to be investigated fully and people to be held accountable, and measures taken to make sure that it doesn't happen again," White House spokesman Scott McClellan said.

But the disclosures are leading to new calls for the Republican-led Congress to use its subpoena powers for further inquiry independent from the administration's investigations.

"What's remarkable and disgraceful about this whole proceeding is that it is being pursued through the Freedom of Information Act," said Steven Aftergood, director of the Project on Government Secrecy at the Federation of American Scientists, which is not a party to the lawsuit. "Where is Congress? Why isn't this the subject of regular ongoing hearings?"

Democrats in Congress, who as minorities in both houses lack power to convene hearings and issue subpoenas, are frustrated that they have not been able to conduct a larger investigation of their own.

But earlier this month, Senator Patrick Leahy, Democrat of Vermont, said hearings next month on Bush's nomination as attorney general of Alberto Gonzales, who as White House counsel wrote one of the memos urging Bush to declare that the Geneva Conventions would not apply to the Afghanistan conflict, would focus on detainee abuse. "Somewhere in the upper reaches of the executive branch a process was set in motion that rolled forward until it produced this scandal," Leahy said in a Senate floor speech.