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Human Rights Shame

Letter to the Editor
Washington Post
March 6, 2006

The Feb. 28 editorial "Homicide Unpunished" pointed to repeated cases of torture and murder of foreign detainees by U.S. personnel that have largely gone unpunished. According to a report by Human Rights First, only 12 of 98 deaths of detainees in U.S. custody have resulted in punishment -- and in most cases, that punishment has been light. The Post noted, "Commanders, starting with President Bush and Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld and extending through the ranks, have repeatedly declined to hold Americans accountable for documented war crimes."

But "Prodding the U.N.," another editorial the same day, encouraged the Bush administration to hold out against reforms proposed by the United Nations Commission on Human Rights because they might allow serial rights violators to continue to serve on the panel. With the reports of abuse, torture and murder coming out of Abu Ghraib, Bagram and Guantanamo Bay and with the well-documented reports of "extreme renditions" -- in which U.S. personnel have kidnapped and flown foreign citizens to torture centers in Syria, Egypt and elsewhere -- hasn't the United States become a "serial rights violator" itself?

A U.N. report on Guantanamo points to massive abuses and calls for the prison to be closed. Entities ranging from the European Parliament to the National Council of Churches USA have urged the United States to do so.

Even Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi of Italy, once one of President Bush's staunchest allies, has urged the United States to close Guantanamo.

The United States had a long and proud history of championing and respecting human rights. This administration, however, has brought shame to that record.

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