

Four British soldiers face court martial over Iraq abuses

By Julie Hyland
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In a written statement to parliament, Attorney General Lord Goldsmith confirmed that charges would be brought on June 14 against four British soldiers over abuses against Iraqis. The charges relate to photographs apparently taken by soldiers in Iraq, which were brought in for development to a British photo-processing shop.

The photographs show a man stripped to his waist and suspended from a rope attached to a forklift truck, which is driven by a laughing soldier.

Another appears to show an Iraqi man being forced to perform oral sex on another man, and another of two Iraqis apparently being forced to perform anal sex. A fourth picture shows two naked Iraqis cowering on the floor.

Staff at the photo-processing shop were so sickened by the images that they alerted the police, who later arrested 18-year-old Gary Bartlam, a private in the First Battalion of the Royal Regiment of Fusiliers.

One year on, Bartlam is one of four fusiliers previously stationed in Basra and Umm Qasr port to be charged with assault, indecent assault and “prejudicing good order and military discipline.”

Bartlam faces seven counts, including three of assault on an Iraqi national and four of indecent assault. Corporal Daniel Kenyon also faces seven charges—two of assaulting an Iraqi national, four of indecent assault and one for failing to report mistreatment. Lieutenant Corporal Mark Cooley faces six counts, two of assault and four of indecent assault.

The fourth soldier has yet to be named because he has not been informed of the charges against him, which include one case of assault and four of indecent assault.

No date has been announced for the court martial, which will be held in public. All four face a prison sentence if they are convicted.

For the past year, both the government and the military have held off making anyone accountable for the scenes of humiliating abuse revealed by the photographs.

Earlier this year, the government and the media had vilified the *Daily Mirror* and its editor Piers Morgan for suggesting that the types of abuses revealed in pictures of the torture of Iraqi inmates at Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad were not confined to a few maverick American soldiers.

The campaign against the *Mirror* was aimed at silencing anyone critical of the US-led war against Iraq, and at diverting attention from the criminal role played by the British government and its military forces in aiding the Bush administration’s brutal colonial-style suppression of the Iraqi people.

Morgan had published photographs given to the newspaper by serving soldiers allegedly showing British troops involved in similar acts of abuse. He had also run accounts from soldiers who claimed to have witnessed acts of violent sadism against Iraqi civilians held in custody.

For weeks, a furor was created over the photographs’ authenticity, which led to Morgan’s sacking on May 14 despite no substantial evidence being presented to prove the photos were fake.

All the while, the government, the military and the press knew that members of the Royal Fusiliers would soon be the first British troops to face charges for torturing Iraqi civilians, in a similar manner to that meted out by US forces. They also knew that other allegations of the mistreatment and even killing of Iraqi civilians were being investigated.

Earlier this month, Armed Forces Minister Adam Ingram admitted that 75 cases of civilian deaths, injuries and alleged ill-treatment of Iraqis by British

soldiers were under investigation. This is more than double the number admitted to previously by the government. On May 4, as the row over the *Mirror's* pictures raged on, Ingram had cited just 33 incidents.

Out of the 75 cases now disclosed, 37 have been completed and closed; 8 are completed and awaiting a decision on further action; and 30 are ongoing.

Lord Goldsmith said that three cases had been referred for possible court martial to the APA and at least four more were likely to be referred to it in the near future.

He confirmed that one of the cases involved a Hassan Abbad Saied, who was allegedly killed whilst held in British custody. Saied's fate is being investigated by the civilian authorities because the commanding officer of the soldier involved had dismissed any crime having been committed, meaning that the soldier cannot be tried under military law.

The other cases include allegations that soldiers in the Queen's Lancashire Regiment beat and killed Iraqi hotel receptionist Baha Mousa, aged 26, in September of last year.

The *Guardian* newspaper revealed on June 15 that many new allegations of abuse by British troops are now under investigation by military police.

The inquiries have been forced by complaints from the Red Cross that British troops mistreated Iraqi detainees, following fighting on May 14 near the town of Majar al-Kabir, in southern Iraq.

The Ministry of Defence (MoD) confirmed to the *Guardian* that the Red Cross complaint concerned events following a three-hour gun battle in the area. According to the MoD, supporters of the Shai cleric Muqtada al-Sadr attacked British troops. Two soldiers received minor injuries in the battle, in the course of which members of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders fixed bayonets.

More than 15 Iraqis were detained and taken to the British base near Amara. At least 9 were transferred one day later to the Shaibah detention centre, near Basra.

The *Guardian* interviewed one of those sent to Shaibah, local policeman Abbas Abid Ali. He told the newspaper that he had not been involved in the fighting but had been working on nearby land.

"We saw people by the side of the road with hands tied behind their backs and who were hooded and lying

on their chests in the dirt. They did the same with us and made us lie on the hot and dirty earth for maybe two hours," Ali said.

Ali said they were put, one on top of another, into the back of an armoured vehicle, "with the soldiers' feet on top of us.

"We remained hooded until the next morning, when I could hear the birds sing. Then they started interrogating us one by one.

"They were using abusive language, shouting at us and kicking and beating us around the face and head and body. I saw one prisoner with his jaw so swollen I couldn't recognise him. They wanted to know who had told us to fight. I said I was a policeman and a farmer, not an insurgent."

According to the *Guardian*, the MoD has not denied that troops may have injured detainees, but has said that none of the reported injuries were caused by bayonets.

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