

Human rights group charges: US continues “renditions” and operates a floating gulag

By David Walsh
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In a new report, the human rights organization Reprieve (UK) alleges that the US government has continued its program of “rendition” and secret imprisonment — despite a claim by George W. Bush in 2006 that the illegal practices had been stopped — and also that it holds an unknown number of “ghost” detainees aboard US navy vessels.

The report has not been issued, but Reprieve made a press release available Monday and the *Guardian* in Britain carried a story the same day providing some of the study’s details.

According to the *Guardian*, the rights group “claims there have been more than 200 new cases of rendition [handing prisoners over to regimes likely to torture them] since 2006.” Reprieve points to Bush’s statement on September 6, 2006 that “the secret prisons are now empty,” and says this is not true. Reprieve and other human rights groups, writes the newspaper, “have uncovered over 200 new cases of rendition and secret detention. Many prisoners remain unaccounted for, held without any legal protection.”

In its press release, Reprieve cites the comment of its director, Clive Stafford Smith: “By its own admission, the US government is currently detaining at least 26,000 people without trial in secret prisons, and information suggests up to 80,000 have been ‘through the system’ since 2001. The US government must show a commitment to rights and basic humanity by immediately revealing who these people are, where they are, and what has been done to them.”

As for the detainees held on US ships, Reprieve alleges in its statement that as many as 17 ships have been employed as “floating prisons” since 2001, and that the “prisoners have been interrogated under torturous conditions before being rendered to other, often undisclosed locations.”

The details have emerged from various sources,

including the US military and Bush administration officials, the Council of Europe, parliamentary bodies and journalists, “as well as the testimonies of prisoners themselves.”

Ships that are known to have held prisoners include the USS Bataan and the USS Peleliu. An additional 15 ships operating around the British territory of Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean, used as a military base by the UK and the US, are suspected by Reprieve of being involved in the practice.

The *Guardian* notes that the forthcoming human rights report “will raise particular concerns over the activities of the USS Ashland and the time it spent off Somalia in early 2007 conducting maritime security operations in an effort to capture al-Qaida terrorists.”

At that time many individuals were abducted by Somali, Kenyan and Ethiopian forces and interrogated by what were most likely FBI and CIA agents. “Ultimately more than 100 individuals were ‘disappeared’ to prisons in locations including Kenya, Somalia, Ethiopia, Djibouti and Guantánamo Bay. Reprieve believes prisoners may have also been held for interrogation on the USS Ashland and other ships in the Gulf of Aden during this time,” reports the *Guardian*.

Prisoners believed by Reprieve to have been imprisoned on board US ships include Ibn Al Sheikh Al Libi, Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef, John Walker Lindh, and David Hicks.

Sheikh Al Libi, the alleged number three in Al Qaeda, was captured in Afghanistan in late 2001. He was handed over to the US and held on the USS Bataan. According to Reprieve, “Information derived from Sheikh Al Libi under torture in Egypt—later recanted and admitted by the Administration to be false—was relied upon by George Bush and Colin Powell as justification for going to war in Iraq. Instead of being taken to Guantánamo Bay in September 2006 with the fourteen other ‘high-value

detainees', Sheikh Al Libi was returned to Libya where he is apparently being held incommunicado and is dying of untreated tuberculosis."

The *Guardian* provides the account of a former Guantánamo detainee who passed on another inmate's description of being held on board an amphibious assault ship: "One of my fellow prisoners in Guantánamo was at sea on an American ship with about 50 others before coming to Guantánamo ... he was in the cage next to me. He told me that there were about 50 other people on the ship. They were all closed off in the bottom of the ship. The prisoner commented to me that it was like something you see on TV. The people held on the ship were beaten even more severely than in Guantánamo."

The allegations about an American "floating gulag" are not new. In June 2004 Human Rights First issued a report ("Ending Secret Detentions") on the network of secret global prisons operated by the US. It alleged that in addition to the notorious US military prisons at Guantánamo, Bagram Air Force Base in Afghanistan and Abu Ghraib, "there are detention facilities that multiple sources have reported are maintained by the United States in various officially undisclosed locations, including facilities in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Jordan, on the British possession of Diego Garcia, and on U.S. war ships at sea." US officials refused to confirm or deny the existence of such facilities.

A year later the UN's special rapporteur on terrorism, Manfred Nowak, told the Agence France Presse wire service in June 2005 that there were "very, very serious accusations that the United States is maintaining secret camps, notably on ships," adding that the vessels were believed to be in the Indian Ocean region.

The AFP commented: "The use of prison ships would allow investigators to interrogate people secretly and in international waters out of the reach of US law, British security expert Francis Tusa said.

"This opens the door to very tough interrogations on key prisoners before it even has been revealed that they have been captured," said Tusa, an editor for the British magazine *Jane's Intelligence Review*."

The American media has been largely uninterested in the existence of a global network of torture facilities, but the *Washington Post* did carry a piece in December 2004 on a secret 'camp within a camp' at Guantánamo, in which it commented in passing, "CIA detention facilities have been located on an off-limits corner of the Bagram air base in Afghanistan, on ships at sea and on Britain's Diego Garcia island in the Indian Ocean."

However, in November 2005, in a more extensive piece on the CIA's secret prisons, a *Post* reporter wrote: "One early idea was to keep them on ships in international waters, but that was discarded for security and logistics reasons." This seems to have been a piece of misinformation.

In response to Reprieve's new allegations, a US navy spokesman, Commander Jeffrey Gordon, told the *Guardian*: "There are no detention facilities on US navy ships." Gordon qualified this denial by adding that it was a matter of public record that certain individuals had been put on ships "for a few days" during what he termed the initial days of detention. (In one of the few cases whose details are known, John Walker Lindh was held for nearly six weeks on two US navy vessels.) Gordon "declined to comment on reports that US naval vessels stationed in or near Diego Garcia had been used as 'prison ships.'"

Such denials, of course, are meaningless. They contradict comments made previously by US military spokespeople.

In December 2001, for example, General Tommy Franks acknowledged that the US was holding Lindh on one of its vessels, when he told the press, "We will continue to control him on the Peleliu until the determination is made regarding whether we handle him within the military or whether he is handled on the civilian side."

Also in 2001, questioned about the purpose of detaining prisoners on ships, Rear Admiral John Stufflebeem, spokesman for the US joint chiefs of staff, admitted the practice, when he replied, "I don't know the specifics. Central command determines for either medical considerations, for the protection of those individuals, for the isolation in the sense of not having forces that would try to come get somebody out of a detention centre, for a security aspect, and obviously an interest to continue interrogation."

Reprieve's Stafford Smith commented this week, "The US administration chooses ships to try to keep their misconduct as far as possible from the prying eyes of the media and lawyers. We will eventually reunite these ghost prisoners with their human rights."

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