

More evidence emerges of torture by Spanish troops in Iraq

By Alejandro López
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A video posted by the daily *El País* provides more evidence of the involvement of Spanish troops in torture and mistreatment of detainees during the Iraq war. It shows soldiers beating up two men in the detention centre in Al Diwaniyah in 2004, shortly before the newly elected Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) government pulled out of Iraq that year.

Five soldiers are shown entering a cell and shouting, “Get up, get up” in Spanish. When the men don’t move, in all probability because they have no knowledge of Spanish, three soldiers begin kicking and insulting them while two others observe from the door. One of the Spanish soldiers can be heard saying off camera: “Wow! They have killed that one already”, whilst the other laughs at his companion’s joke. The men on the floor can be heard gasping, coughing and moaning.

Spanish troops were deployed in Iraq in August 2003 as part of the US-led coalition forces that former Prime Minister José Maria Aznar agreed with US President George Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair. Spain also was given the command of troops from Honduras, El Salvador, Dominican Republic and Nicaragua.

A total of 1,300 troops were deployed in Najaf, south of Baghdad, one of the holiest cities in Iraq and a pilgrimage centre for the world’s Shi’ite faithful. Some idea of the mind-set drummed into the troops was indicated by the use of a new arm badge incorporating the Cross of St. James of Compostela—a symbol of the liquidation of the Muslims who were driven out of Spain after centuries of fighting in 1492. This was also the start of the period of colonialist expansion by Spain’s Catholic monarchy.

Even the centre-right newspaper *El Mundo* was forced to remark, “To put the Cross of St. James of

Compostela on the uniforms of Spanish soldiers demonstrates an absolute ignorance of the psychology of the society in which they will have to carry out their mission”. And it added, “It would be difficult to come up with any symbol more offensive to the Shiite population than this cross”.

The Ministry of Defence has admitted the authenticity of the video and that, “In accordance with the instructions of Defence Minister Pedro Morenés, the army has placed in the hands of a military judge in Madrid the first conclusions of a summary of information in relation to a video recently published regarding a case of alleged mistreatment of Iraqi prisoners by Spanish soldiers”.

Nevertheless, the essential purpose of this investigation will be to whitewash the role of top policy-makers in encouraging and sanctioning the use of torture. This was not the first time torture was used on detainees by Spanish soldiers and nothing has happened to the perpetrators.

According to the Spanish journalist Olga Rodríguez, “[In] Diwaniya, in 2004, it was not difficult to find local people who knew that Spanish troops mistreated prisoners. ‘It is an open secret’ said an Iraqi whom I had known for some time”.

In March 2004, US troops detained Flayeh al Mayali, an Iraqi translator who helped journalists and the Spanish intelligence service CNI, accusing him of helping insurgent forces murder seven CNI agents in Iraq. Mayali spent four days in Spanish custody where he says he was hooded, tied up and beaten and deprived of sleep. He then spent a year in the detention camp at Abu Ghraib and Camp Bucca, after which he was released without charge. No investigation took place. Even National Court Judge Fernando Andreu, who opened an inquiry into the deaths of the agents, was not

informed of Mayali's detention.

In another instance, a Spanish intelligence officer admitted that the Spanish army used US "enhanced interrogation" methods that included prolonged stress positions, exposure to harsh elements, waterboarding and other examples of physical and mental torture. The officer claimed, "we Spanish do not torture or humiliate, but we put pressure. We follow the North American operating manual: we placed sandbags on the heads of those who did not collaborate to make them lose their sense of direction. For the more stubborn we would put on a heavy metal Metallica CD [...]. We also injected a syringe with liquid up their noses, it does no permanent damage and leaves no marks, but [the victim] spends ten minutes squealing like a pig".

A Spanish soldier told the *La Clave* newspaper in March 2006 that "In a conflict there is always torture, but it never comes to light. What is going on with the Americans and the British is a daily occurrence. The more information is obtained [via torture], the fewer casualties there are in their own forces".

A total of 111 Iraqis were detained by the Spanish army in Iraq, according to government sources. The names of the arrested are unknown, but the government indicated in 2006 that 78 of those arrested were handed over to the Iraqi police, whilst 33 were sent to the Baghdad Confinement Facility administered by the coalition, and most likely ended up in Abu Ghraib.

Former PSOE Defence Minister José Bono has denied any knowledge of the latest video and sought to exonerate himself and his Popular Party predecessor Federico Trillo-Figueroa, saying, "I cannot assure you outright that this never happened before I took over the ministry, but I am convinced that my predecessor never knew about this".

However, in 2010 cables from the US embassy in Madrid released by WikiLeaks showed that whilst the PSOE government and judiciary were promoting a public image of independence from US imperialism, following the withdrawal of troops in 2004, they were busy working behind the scenes to prevent prosecutions of US officials and military personnel charged with war crimes, including those involved in the death of Spanish journalist José Couso.

The PSOE government also collaborated with CIA rendition flights to Guantanamo Bay, allowing them to refuel in the Canary Islands and Palma de Mallorca.

According to WikiLeaks cables, the then vice-president of the PSOE government, Fernández de la Vega, met with the US ambassador and stated that, "Spain had nothing against [CIA] intelligence flights through Spanish territory", but they wanted "to be informed" to prevent "being caught unaware".

Ever since the death of General Franco, the army has been promoted in Spain as a humanitarian force dedicated to keeping the peace. The video lifts a curtain on this myth and shows its true nature—an occupying army in a US-led neo-colonial war.

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