

Brutal Human Rights Abuses: Torture, Sanctions and Failure to Address “Economic Rights”

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Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#), [Global Economy](#), [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

“Wrong things are done in the name of Islam, worse things are being done in the name of democracy and human rights” (Dr. Mohamed Mahathir, former Malaysian Prime Minister(1))

Torture - Legal Black Holes

Some philosophers have suggested that one way to measure how civilized a society has become is to look at how it treats its prisoners.(2) In particular we can look at torture. Torture is considered such an extreme abuse of human rights that it is illegal under international law under all circumstances. This means that no government is allowed to use it, even in wartime. People in advanced nations assume that their governments do not torture prisoners, but it is practised by the US, and was used by Britain in its colonies and in Northern Ireland.

Following the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the US government created a prison called Camp X-Ray at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba. By building it outside the United States they hoped that they could ignore existing legal rules regarding the treatment of prisoners. The US also created a new category of prisoner, known as ‘unlawful combatant’, so that existing international rules regarding the treatment of prisoners-of-war could be ignored. The prisoners there were initially not allowed access to lawyers and were tortured.

An important part of British and US law is that prisoners are presumed to be innocent until proven guilty. Detaining prisoners for years at Guantanamo without a proper trial reverses that assumption. They are effectively presumed guilty, even though there was no evidence against many of them. Camp X-Ray has been described as a legal black hole.(3) The people in Guantanamo Bay were supposed to be the most dangerous people on the planet, yet hundreds of them have been released without trial, indicating that they were not the threat that they were made out to be. Since their release, eight former inmates have gone on to commit crimes, but they had been treated so badly that a senior US intelligence expert said “if they weren’t terrorists before they went to Gitmo [Guantanamo Bay], they would have been by the time they came out”.(4)

The US also used Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq as a torture centre, where some prisoners were tortured to death. A few US soldiers were prosecuted for this, but the people most responsible, at the highest levels of the US government, were not. The commander of Abu Ghraib later estimated that 90% of prisoners held there were innocent.(5) It is also clear that torture by British soldiers and intelligence agencies still takes place. The British government repeatedly tries to deny its involvement with torture, but it has been standard practice for British intelligence officials to be present and asking questions while people are being tortured in other countries.(6)

Extraordinary Rendition means Kidnapping and Torture

Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib are just the tip of the iceberg. The US has a global network of what are called 'black sites'. These are secret sites where the US intelligence agency, the CIA, can carry out illegal activities, such as torture. They use propaganda to hide their involvement with torture by calling it 'enhanced interrogation techniques.' The US has flown people to other countries, such as Egypt, Morocco, Jordan and Uzbekistan, so that they can be tortured. This is known as extraordinary rendition.(7) European governments originally denied that these flights took place or that they had any knowledge of them, but evidence gradually emerged that European leaders, including British politicians, were not only aware of what was going on, but were also participating in these torture flights by allowing the Americans to use their airstrips for refuelling.(8)

The US and Britain support torture by other governments

Torture is rife throughout the world. Britain and America have been among the leading exporters of torture equipment. Britain has even exported gallows and torture chambers, and the US exports electro-shock devices to regimes that are known to use them for torture.(9) The British ambassador to Uzbekistan until 2004, Craig Murray, complained about the treatment of prisoners by the Uzbek government (one was boiled to death). The Uzbeks were supported by the US and British governments, who were aware of the torture but turned a blind eye.(10) Murray was so disgusted with this that he resigned.

There are no 'ticking bomb' scenarios in the real world

Most mainstream discussion of torture revolves around simplistic notions such as "If there is a bomb about to explode and kill large numbers of people, and we have a prisoner who knows where it is, should we torture him in order to find it?" This is known as "The ticking bomb scenario."(11) When asked this question, most people answer "yes." We have been convinced that under some circumstances, torture is a necessary evil. In the real world, however, torture has nothing to do with ticking bombs. Much of the time it isn't even about extracting information, as it is widely recognized that people will say anything to end the torture. Torture is mostly about ruling through fear. Torture throughout South America in the 1980's or in Abu Ghraib in Iraq is not abuses or excesses carried out by a few wayward individuals. It is part of the system. Torture occurs when rulers (usually dictators or foreign armies that occupy a country) do not have the consent of the people they are governing. They use torture, along with other violent techniques, to create fear in the minds of the population, to help them stay in power.(12)

War by other means - Sanctions For Some Governments, Support For Others

"We are in the process of destroying an entire society" (Denis Halliday, UN commissioner for Human Rights, talking about sanctions on Iraq(13))

Sanctions are where some limits are placed on trade with a country in order to try to persuade the government of that country to do what 'we' (usually meaning the US) want. They have been described as 'war by other means'. Sanctions were placed on Iraq after the first Gulf War in 1991 and lasted for 12 years.(14) The US claimed that this would stop Iraq's leader, Saddam Hussein, from re-building his weapons systems, and would gradually force him from power.

In fact they stopped him importing essential medicines and components to keep the country's essential services, like the sanitation system, working. The sanctions were described in the US congress as "infanticide [murder of children] masquerading as policy"(15) because hundreds of thousands of children died. In 1996 US Secretary-of-State, Madeleine Albright, demonstrated that she, and many other US officials, are sociopaths, when she said that the deaths of half a million children in Iraq were a price worth paying to get rid of Saddam Hussein.(16)

Two UN commissioners for Human Rights resigned because of the way the US and Britain kept insisting on these sanctions, despite overwhelming evidence that they had little effect on Saddam's hold over the country and had terrible effects on the people.(17) Further evidence regarding the sanctions came to light during a Parliamentary Select Committee in 2007. The British official who had been responsible for Iraq sanctions stated:

"The weight of evidence clearly indicates that sanctions caused massive human suffering among ordinary Iraqis, particularly children. We, the US and UK governments, were the primary engineers and offenders of sanctions and were well aware of this evidence at the time but we largely ignored it or blamed it on the Saddam government. [We] effectively denied the entire population a means to live".(18)

This statement not only tells us about the harm that sanctions cause, but also highlights how politicians and the media try to distort events using propaganda. In this case by trying to convince us that the deaths were caused by Saddam, and not by the sanctions.

Recent sanctions on Syria, Venezuela and Iran are having terrible consequences,(19) with numerous international organisations voicing concern about their effects, but the US government keeps trying to claim that the sanctions do not affect ordinary people. The next time a US or British politician says 'bad things are happening in Venezuela, we must do something', the correct response is to say:

'We must stop doing anything that makes things worse in Venezuela. We must end the existing sanctions, and we must stop trying to destabilise the country to overthrow the government'.

In contrast to this, the US and Britain support other leaders who commit human rights abuses in regions where the US and Britain want to control resources and trade. There seems to be a general rule of thumb "The bigger the crime and the more powerful the villain, the smaller the punishment. If the villain is large enough, criminality disappears".(20) When Jimmy Carter was US President (1977-1981), it was understood that certain important US allies were off-limits to human rights discussions. This included China, South Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam, Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Some of these countries were sufficiently important that they could, literally, get away with murder.(21) The Nigerian government killed local people who objected to the oil company, Shell, destroying their homes whilst drilling for oil. The Colombian government killed union organisers who objected to Coca-Cola's exploitation. These crimes have been well-documented (and are discussed in more detail in other posts) but they have little impact on US or British support for those governments.

Deny, Deny, Deny

The US and British governments have a long history of denying knowledge of atrocities

committed by the regimes that they support. When the government of Idi Amin of Uganda murdered and tortured people in the early 1970's, the British government denied all knowledge, as it was still supplying military training to Amin's soldiers. Files declassified 30 years later show that the British government was fully aware of Amin's crimes.(22) The British government also assisted Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge, who committed genocide in Cambodia in the 70's, yet the British Prime Minister at the time, Margaret Thatcher, denied this.(23) In the case of the US, some of the world's most notorious torturers, such as Noriega of Panama, were trained by the US military and supported by the US government throughout the 70's and 80's,(24) yet the US government and the CIA repeatedly denied such support.

Former British politician Alan Clark was once interviewed about his role in selling weapons to the Indonesian government, which had used them to massacre huge numbers of people on the island of East Timor. He said he was a vegetarian, but that his concern for the welfare of animals did not extend to the people of East Timor.(25) As far as he was concerned, selling weapons to murderous dictators was reasonable. This interview was a rare glimpse of honesty about foreign policy. A senior politician was admitting that the murder of hundreds of thousands of humans in another country was unimportant. The right of the rich and powerful to control trade and resources trumps everything, including human rights. The people who consistently lose out are the poor.(26)

The failure to Discuss Economic Rights

The 1948 UN Declaration of Human Rights includes the idea of 'security of person'. As well as meaning that a person has the right not to be shot or tortured, it also means that they have the right not to starve because of inadequate food supplies, or die of easily preventable diseases. As we shall see in later posts, it is the abuse of these economic rights that causes the greatest suffering worldwide. The mainstream media consistently fails to discuss how the global economic system, driven by the US and other advanced nations, puts corporate profits ahead of human lives.

As we have seen in earlier posts, when the US overthrows a government, they want to impose an extreme capitalist economic system, geared towards corporate profit irrespective of the downsides for poor people. In general that system makes poverty worse. The new governments that impose this system know that ordinary people will object, so they torture their opponents. In South America this included economists, psychologists, academics, left-wing party-leaders, trade union leaders, religious leaders, farmers who wanted land reform, and community workers who helped the poor and demanded better services for them.(27) The governments used a combination of military force and political terror to destroy opposition to their rule and to the economic system.(28) During the 1970's, Argentinian generals sent death squads to torture and murder large numbers of civilians. Argentinian journalist Rodolpho Walsh wrote a letter to the generals saying:

"These events [torture and murder]... are not, however, the greatest suffering inflicted on the Argentinian people, nor the worst violation for human rights which you have committed. It is in the economic policy of this government where one discovers... a greater atrocity which punishes millions of people through planned misery".(29)

The enormous problems caused by these economic policies will be discussed in later posts.

Further reading

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Ian Cobain, *Cruel Britannia: A Secret History of Torture*

Abdul-Haq al-Ani and Tarik al-Ani, *Genocide in Iraq: The Case Against the UN Security Council and Member States*, 2012

Useful Websites

[Andyworthington.co.uk](http://andyworthington.co.uk)

Notes

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2) Quote usually attributed to Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Russian Novelist, 1821-1881, but this is almost certainly untrue, see Ilya Vinitsky, 'Dostoyevsky Misprisoned: "The House of the Dead" and American Prison Literature', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 23 Dec 2019, at

<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/dostoyevsky-misprisoned-the-house-of-the-dead-and-american-prison-literature/>

3) Johan Steyn, 'Guantanamo: The Legal Black Hole', *The International and Comparative Law Quarterly*, Vol. 53, No. 1, Jan 2004, at

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4) David Rose, 'Guantanamo: America's War on Human Rights', cited in Bob Brecher, *Torture and the Ticking Bomb*, 2007, p.68

5) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abu_Ghraib_torture_and_prisoner_abuse

6) Ian Cobain, 'Iraq abuse enquiry little more than a whitewash, says official', 11 Oct 2012, at

<https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2012/oct/11/iraq-abuse-inquiry-whitewash-claim>

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7) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Extraordinary_rendition

8) BBC News, 'UK apology over rendition flights', 21 Feb 2008, at

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/7256587.stm

9) Mark Curtis, *The Great Deception*, 1998, p.15

10) Craig Murray, 'The Choice', 17 May 2020, at

<https://www.craigmurray.org.uk/archives/2020/05/the-choice/>

11) Bob Brecher, *Torture and the Ticking Bomb*, 2007, p.2

12) Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine*, 2007, pp125-126, also p.76 and p.211

13) Jean Bricmont, *Humanitarian Imperialism*, 2005, p.55

14) Abdul-Haq al-Ani and Tarik al-Ani, *Genocide in Iraq: The Case Against the UN Security Council and Member States*, 2012

15) BBC News, 'US Congressmen Criticise Iraqi Sanctions', Feb 17, 2000, at http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/646783.stm

16) The Albright comment is one of the defining examples of how little US policy makers care about foreign lives, discussed at

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Madeleine_Albright

17) Hans Von Sponeck's resignation discussed in 'UN Sanctions Rebel Resigns', BBC News, Feb 14, 2000, at http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/642189.stm

Denis Halliday's resignation discussed in 'World: UN Official Blasts Iraq Sanctions', Sept 30, 1998, at

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/183499.stm

18) Carne Ross, cited in John Pilger, 'The political trial of a caring man and the end of justice in America', 8 November 2012, at

<http://johnpilger.com/articles/the-political-trial-of-a-caring-man-and-the-end-of-justice-in-america>

19) Greg Wilpert, Leonardo Flores, Kathy Kelly, 'US Sanctions Undermine Coronavirus Response in Iran and Venezuela', 20 Mar 2020, radio interview, at

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20) Edward S. Herman, 'The US Versus The Rules of War', 25 April 1999, at

<https://zcomm.org/zcommentary/the-u-s-versus-the-rules-of-war-by-edward-herman/>

21) Kirsten Sellars, *The Rise and Rise of Human Rights*, 2002, pp.126 -130

22) Mark Curtis, *Unpeople*, 2004, pp.245-261

23) John Pilger, 'Cambodia's Missing Accused', 20 Feb 2009, at

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24) William Blum, *Rogue State*, 2006, pp.63-80

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26) 'Shell oil in the McSpotlight', at

www.mcspotlight.org/beyond/companies/shell.html

Sybilla Brodzinsky, 'Coca-Cola Boycott Launched After Killings At Columbian Plants', 24 July 2003, at www.guardian.co.uk/international/story/0,3604,1004598,00.html

27) Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine*, 2007, p.97 and p.109

28) Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine*, 2007, p.84

29) Michael McCaughan, 'True Crimes: Rodolpho Walsh, the Life and Times of a Radical Intellectual', pp.285-289, cited in Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine*, 2007, p.95

Rod Driver is a part-time academic who is particularly interested in de-bunking modern-day US and British propaganda. This is the tenth in a series entitled *Elephants In The Room*, which attempts to provide a beginners guide to understanding what's really going on in relation to war, terrorism, economics and poverty, without the nonsense in the mainstream media.

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