

By: Alissa J Ruben

From: Nytimes.com | [Original Article](#)

KABUL, Afghanistan — Detainees are hung by their hands and beaten with cables, and in some cases their genitals are twisted until the prisoners lose consciousness at sites run by the Afghan intelligence service and the Afghan National Police, according to [a United Nations report](#) released here on Monday.

The report, based on interviews over the past year with more than 300 suspects linked to the insurgency, is the most comprehensive look at the Afghan detention system and an issue that has long concerned Western officials and human rights groups.

It paints a devastating picture of abuse, citing evidence of “systematic torture” during interrogations by Afghan intelligence and police officials even as American and other Western backers provide training and pay for nearly the entire budget of the Afghan ministries running the detention centers.

The report does not assess whether American officials knew of the abuses. But such widespread use of torture in a detention system supported by American mentors and money raises serious questions about potential complicity of American officials and whether they benefited from information obtained from suspects who had been tortured.

“I know of no one who knew about these alleged abuses as they were happening,” said an American official, speaking on the condition of anonymity because of the delicacy of the issues involved. “Thus, it’s impossible to know if there was any information passed on that came in some form from these alleged incidents.”

At a minimum, there appears to have been little effort to scrutinize the practices of Afghanistan’s security forces at the detention centers, as pressure has built to move as much responsibility as

possible to the Afghans and to reduce American involvement here.

As the United States looks to wind down a decade of war here, the report threatens to complicate efforts to transfer more detention responsibilities to the Afghans. It could also set in motion provisions of American law that would require the United States to cut off money to any Afghan unit involved in abuses.

The Afghan government denied the worst of the allegations in the report, while allowing that there were "deficiencies" in a war-torn country that routinely faced suicide bombings and other forms of terrorism.

Early word of the findings spurred immediate action. After seeing a draft of the report in September, Gen. John R. Allen, the [NATO](#) commander here in Afghanistan, halted transfers of those suspected of being insurgents to 16 of the facilities identified as sites where torture or abuse routinely took place.

He has since initiated a plan to investigate the sites, provide training in modern interrogation techniques and monitor the Afghan government's practices. The American Embassy is now heavily involved in devising a long-term monitoring program for Afghan detention sites, American officials said.

In [a statement](#), NATO officials said they were working with the United Nations and the Afghan government to "improve detention operations" and "establish safeguards."

Nearly half of the detainees interviewed by United Nations researchers who were in detention sites run by the Afghan intelligence service, known as the National Directorate of Security, told of torture. The national police treatment of detainees was somewhat less severe and widespread, the report found. Its research covered 47 facilities in 22 provinces. Most of those interviewed were suspected of involvement in the insurgency, which has attacked both Afghans and their Western allies.

Of the 324 security-related detainees interviewed, 89 had been handed over to the Afghan

intelligence service or the police by international military forces, and in 19 cases, the men were tortured once they were in Afghan custody. The [United Nations Convention Against Torture](#) prohibits the transfer of a detained person to the custody of another state where there are substantial grounds for believing that the detainee is at risk of torture.

“Use of interrogation methods, including suspension, beatings, electric shock, stress positions and threatened sexual assault is unacceptable by any standard of international human rights law,” the report said.

One detainee described being taken in for interrogation in Kandahar and having the interrogator ask if he knew the name of the official’s office. The detainee said that after he answered, the interrogator said, “You should confess what you have done in the past as [Taliban](#) — even stones confess here.”

The man was beaten over several days for hours at a time with electrical wire and then signed a confession, the report said.

The report pointed out that even though the abusive practices are pervasive, the Afghan government does not condone torture and has explicitly said the abuses found by the United Nations are not government policy. Several longtime aid workers here said that as disturbing as the allegations were, there had been improvements in detainee treatment, particularly since the Soviet occupation, when many people were detained and never heard from again.

“Reform is both possible and desired,” said Staffan de Mistura, the United Nations special representative for Afghanistan, noting that the government had cooperated with the report’s researchers and had begun to take remedial action.

“We take this report very seriously,” said Shaida M. Abdali, the Afghan deputy national security adviser.

“Our government, especially the president, has taken a very strong stand on the protection of everyone’s human rights, their humanity, everywhere and especially in prisons and in detention,” he said.

The government said that it had set up a group to look into the problem and that it had dismissed several employees at a unit known as Department 124, where the United Nations said the torture appeared to have been the most entrenched. The intelligence service is now admonishing newly assigned interrogators to observe human rights, the government said in its response.

Still, a senior diplomat here said, the report had the potential “to undermine the strategic partnership” with both the European Union and the United States, referring to the agreement for future relations that the Americans and Afghans had hoped to complete by December.

It could also jeopardize American financing. Under a law written by Senator Patrick J. Leahy, Democrat of Vermont, neither the State Department nor the Defense Department can provide assistance or training to any unit of the security forces of a foreign country if there is credible evidence of gross human rights abuses. However, financing can go forward to other units not involved and even to the offending units if serious remedial actions are taken.

“This would clearly constitute credible evidence,” said Tom Malinowski, the director of Human Rights Watch’s Washington bureau, who has tracked the Leahy law.

Recently, the United States pulled financing for some units of the Pakistani military that were involved in extrajudicial killings in the tribal areas. Money for the Afghan intelligence agency may not be covered by the law, but it was unlikely that the Obama administration would use a legal technicality to continue financing the agency if torture allegations persisted, Mr. Malinowski said.

Ultimately the prosecution of the torturers is required, said Georgette Gagnon, the director of human rights for the United Nations here, in order to “prevent and end such acts in the future.”

There have been a number of instances that raise similar questions in other places, including Uzbekistan, Pakistan and El Salvador, according to [a RAND Corporation report in 2006](#). Aid to Colombia in fighting its drug cartels and insurgents has also raised some of these issues and has periodically been halted to some military units as a result of gross violations of human rights, Mr. Malinowski said.

