

By Andy Worthington

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This is the fourth article in “[Bagram Week](#)” here at Andy Worthington, with seven articles in total exploring what is happening at the main US prison in Afghanistan through reports, analyses of review boards, and the voices of the prisoners themselves, and ongoing updates to [the definitive annotated Bagram prisoner list](#)

As part of “Bagram Week” here at Andy Worthington, I’m cross-posting a rather harrowing story, [originally published on the Afghanistan Analysts Network](#), that I came across recently, and then lost again. I retrieved it via my colleague Mathias Vermeulen, who, on his blog [The Lift](#), picked out a key passage in this bleak account by a former Bagram prisoner of the time he spent in the Tor jail — [Bagram’s secret torture prison](#) — before his transfer to the main facility. This is the passage:

After our arrest we were first taken to Tor Jail, or the Black Jail. It was terrible. They didn’t treat us like humans at all. They didn’t allow us to sleep. There was nothing to cover ourselves with. They insulted the Quran. Whenever we were taken to the bathroom, they left the door open. We never knew when it was time to pray or which direction we should face. We never saw sunlight. We were treated rudely during interrogation.

This entire article is a damning revelation — an insider’s account not only of the “enhanced interrogation techniques” used in the Tor Jail, but more generally of the cruelty and incompetence that fuels Bagram as surely as it fueled Guantánamo, with random arrests, threats, psychological abuse, poor intelligence, incompetent translators, “segregation” — in isolation cells — used as persistently as it was in Guantánamo on perceived troublemakers, and, worse than Guantánamo (but [as Bagram was in its early days](#)) the death of a prisoner that was, it seems, effortlessly covered up and not reported. The account is also revealing about

the dysfunctional relationship between the Afghan and American detention facilities, where there is supposed to be cooperation regarding trials, but where in fact chaos reigns, and prisoners are being lost between the two systems, abandoned unless they can pay a substantial bribe.

Overall, this article should, I think, be widely circulated as an antidote to all the claims that the move from Bagram to the new Detention Facility in Parwan has suddenly done away with abusive patterns of behavior that, it seems, are engrained in the operations, and in the casual racism and dehumanization of war, and that have nothing to do with the buildings themselves. Of all the accounts I have read, this one rings the truest, not just because it accords with other insider reports I have heard over the last few years about the ongoing physical and psychological abuse of prisoners, but also because it so clearly echoes what we know about detention operations throughout the “War on Terror,” which will not fundamentally change until someone draws a line under it all, and actually starts all over again, with respect for the Geneva Conventions that were shredded by the Bush administration, and that have not been thoroughly reintroduced under President Obama.

Stories people tell: Bagram prison; not a single good day **By Martine van Bijlert, Afghanistan Analysts Network, March 9, 2011**

There are so many stories of people who get caught up in the nightly operations by American and Afghan forces. In the search for ‘kill & capture’ targets the net is cast wide: once a door is kicked in all males in a household are usually taken for interrogation. And it is then anyone’s guess when they will be released again. One story — out of many — of how an unlucky sleep-over resulted in years of detention, and what those years were like.

I was arrested by American and Afghan Special Forces about two and a half years ago. It was night and I was staying as a guest in a house when the forces came. I had saved money to open a small medicine shop and that night I had gone to see this man to buy medicine. Maybe someone reported him to the Americans; in Afghanistan there are so many enmities. Maybe they thought there was some kind of meeting or program going on, because there were other guests as well. I don’t know why they arrested us, but they took all the men in the house: nine in total, including a 12-year old boy.

When they came we were sleeping. None of us was wearing shoes or proper clothes. One of us was only wearing his underwear. They took us with them just like that. We had to walk through the mud. After our arrest, one of the men was handed to the NDS (National Directorate for Security); he was a friend of the owner of the house. The four sons and a nephew were

released after about two weeks. Then two other guests were released. They had come that night to get a *tahwiz* (religious amulet). They were released a few months before me. The owner of the house and I were released last, now a few weeks ago.

After our arrest we were first taken to Tor Jail, or the Black Jail. It was terrible. They didn’t treat us like humans at all. They didn’t allow us to sleep. There was nothing to cover ourselves with. They insulted the Quran. Whenever we were taken to the bathroom, they left the door open. We never knew when it was time to pray or which direction we should face. We never saw sunlight. We were treated rudely during interrogation. Some people were also beaten, but that didn’t happen to me.

After 33 days in the Black Jail I was transferred to the big jail. Here we were visited by ICRC [the International Committee of the Red Cross], which was good even though they had no authority. They brought letters, but they didn’t tell the press about us or about the circumstances we were in. The Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) didn’t come to the prison; maybe they were not allowed in. About a month before my release they came, but they were so young. What could they do?



Many things were really bad. For instance, I was locked up in ‘segregation’ sixteen times, sometimes for 10 or 20 days at a time. I did nothing special to provoke this. I didn’t do anything serious like hit them or attack them. It happened when I asked for my rights. That was reason enough to call me *shureshi* (trouble maker, revolter). I just asked for food, for instance, or I complained that they were interfering with our prayers. The food in segregation was especially bad; they called it ‘low-grade food’. It smelled and tasted horrible and made you sick. They even put an old man of 75 years in segregation, with bare feet and a bare head. The guards also used gas on the prisoners, it was like teargas and it made it very difficult to breathe.

There was one group of [American] guards who were called *badmashi* (thugs). They behaved very badly and rudely with the prisoners. One of them once told me he would kill me. When that group left things got a little better. But we did not see one good day in that place. The Black Jail of course was worse. At least in the big prison I was registered with ICRC. I knew they could not just execute me. Other prisoners said that from Tor Jail many people had disappeared.

There was a man from Uruzgan; he was about 30 years old. He became very agitated, but the doctor said he was alright. When the doctor finally came, he had died. Those kinds of things happen. But they don’t appear in the press, nobody pays attention.

There was also a young boy, he was mute and had psychological problems. When he was put in our cell, he was climbing the walls and trying to hurt himself. We tried to calm him down and to stop him. I told those in charge that it was not our job to look after him and that he should receive proper treatment. They said he was a suicide bomber. In the end they put him in segregation. When I was released he was still there. By that time he had been there for three months. He didn’t receive any medication. He was very loud and kept all the prisoners in that section awake.

There were also no facilities for handicapped or wounded people. Many prisoners had no legs or had other handicaps. It was difficult for them to go to the bathroom. There was one person in my cell who had fallen off the roof when he was arrested. His 10-year old son was shot during the raid. He arrived in prison with two broken legs. For two months we carried him to the bathroom.

About one year ago things in the prison became a bit better. A mullah was appointed. He belonged to the Americans and he helped improve the situation. Then the ANA [Afghan National Army] took over and we were transferred to a new jail. The new jail was better, there were bigger cells. But the Americans were still in charge. The Afghan soldiers had no right to talk to the prisoners. In every block there was a station, one at the north and one at the south, where there were Americans. They had to be informed about any request the prisoners had. The Afghan soldiers complained that they were just like waiters or sweepers in a hotel and that they weren’t allowed to do anything. Even the officers felt like that.

I was interrogated so many times. They asked me, “Do you know this person? Have you done

that?” Once they showed me some pictures of what looked like explosives. I don’t know what it was, but they kept saying that it belonged to me. I was tied to a chair until nine o’clock at night. The Americans say that they don’t do *zulm* (oppression, cruelty), but they do. They bothered prisoners in a psychological way. They threatened them.

Once they told me that they would bring my father to the prison. I said that I would be very happy, because my father had died several years ago and I would like to see him again. But they did the same to other prisoners, who really became worried. Especially those who were not educated, who didn’t know whether the Americans might really do this or not. Sometimes the Americans even told the prisoners they would bring their wives or sisters to the prison. There was one man from Zabul. When they arrested him they took pictures of all the women in his family. During the interrogation they showed him the pictures and said they were going to make copies and distribute them in the whole of Zabul. They also took pictures of prisoners while they were having a shower and threatened to distribute them in their home areas. These kinds of things can give you psychological problems.

There were also problems with the translators. Some of them didn’t understand Afghan vocabulary at all. Once when I was being interrogated I told them that I had done two *namaz* (prayers) and that there were two left. He translated that I had shot two rockets and that there were two left. I didn’t know it at the time, but they confronted me with this during an interrogation much later. The whole thing was like a stupid joke.

There was a commander who was also detained. After six and a half years they told him, “We still have doubts that you are a Hezb-e Islami commander”. He said, “You have doubts? There is no doubt! I am a Hezb-e Islami commander, for sure. But what is my crime?” He was a commander and a *malek*, a person who tried to build up the government, but they kept him detained for such a long time for no reason. There was another man called Abu Baqer. The Americans thought he was Commander Abu Baqer, because his name was the same, so they kept him detained for seven years. In the meantime the real Commander Abu Baqer was still moving around and everybody knew it.

Some prisoners did not see their relatives for a year or more. There was a man from Khost. When his relatives asked about him, the Americans told them that he was not there — but he was. After a year and a half he was finally given a meeting. After that he was released.

I was released a few weeks ago. At my release an American colonel apologized to me. He said

that they had concluded that I was innocent and that I had worked for the good of Afghanistan. He said that after two and a half years! They gave me a bottle of perfume, but they did not return my possessions. When I was arrested I had \$6000 on me, as an advance for the medicines, and also my mobile phone and some afghanis. They did not give them back. At the time I didn't say anything; I just wanted to leave. But they should give it back.

Now I am in a bad situation. I feel like half my life is gone. My economic situation is bad, my savings are gone. My health is not well. My legs hurt, I don't know why, maybe because of the lack of exercise. On the day of arrest I also hit my leg, when they pushed me into the car while I was blindfolded. For the first few months I couldn't walk properly. My back also hurts. We went on strike for a while in the prison, because of the bad conditions and because we were upset that our fate was not clear. After four and a half months they came in with force to break up the strike. One man broke a leg and an old man broke a rib. Two guards fell on top of me with their heavy jackets. My back still aches from that.

One prisoner wrote a book. He actually wrote two books. While he was in prison he gathered toilet paper and wrote on it with a pen. We were not allowed pens, but he had received one from an ANA guard. The books are called 'Gift from Bagram' and 'From Karez Mir to Bagram'. I don't know if they have been published yet.

According to Afghan and international law you can detain a person for three months, but they hold people for years and years without any decision. Since the demonstrations there are now reviews every six months, but there are so many people who have already been kept for years and who are still in the prison. Their detention just gets extended every time. Once when I was getting ready for the DRB (Detention Review Board), the representative gave me a piece of paper and said that if I read that at the meeting I would be released. The paper said that I had killed people. I said I cannot read that, but he said if you do you will be handed over to the Afghan government. I went to the court but I did not read the paper. My detention was extended for six months.

In the end I was sent to two Afghan courts. They decided to release me. Two months after that the Americans released me. They don't care about the Afghan courts, and the Afghan courts are not processing the cases. There are more than 300 prisoners that are in between the two systems. Their files have been sent to the Afghans, but they are still in the American prison. They are lost. If they don't give money, their file will never be found again.

I wasted two and a half years of my life. I don't feel well at all. I am afraid that, because this happened once for no reason, it may happen again. Who can guarantee me that I will not be unlucky again? When I was arrested I was engaged. I still am, but I have no money or income. So much happened in those years, I cannot remember it all. I have only told you what I remembered. I think it might be good if my story is published. The world should know what it was like. There was not one good day in all those years. We were not treated like humans. Even though we had done nothing wrong and they had no information against us.