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Mr. President, we are still torturing?

NAT HENTOFF

On Dec. 26, 2002, Dana Priest and Barton Gellman broke, in the Washington Post, the first undeniable story of American torturing of suspected terrorists. In a CIA secret prison at our Bagram air base detention center in Afghanistan, prisoners were being subjected to the by now all-too-familiar ways of "breaking" suspects during the Bush-Cheney "terror presidency."

The Bagram detention center itself has continued to operate with currently more than 600 prisoners and is being planned to expand its capacity to more than 1,100 as President Obama sends more troops into Afghanistan.

In a continuation of the Bush-Cheney practice of deliberately keeping certain groups of suspects far away from our courts and our laws, as well as hidden from monitoring by international human rights groups, the Obama administration has told a federal court that our prisoners at Bagram, many held for more than six years without charges, have no rights under our laws.

On June 30, Glenn Greenwald (Salon) - one of the most consistently reliable reporters on Bush and Obama degrading what both call "American values" - quoted Human Rights Watch researcher John Sifton, a reliable source for this column, as having documented that at Bagram:

"Approximately 100 detainees, including CIA-held detainees, have died during U.S. interrogations, and some are known to have been tortured to death."

More conservatively, actual autopsy reports obtained by the ACLU disclose that at least 21 Bagram "detainees," and possibly more, have been killed during "coercive interrogations." It's difficult to get precise statistics from legal black holes.

Says Tina Foster, executive director of the International Justice Network, representing Bagram prisoners: "If the Obama Administration genuinely wants to restore the moral authority of the United States, commitment to 'change' must extend to Bagram and all the detainees held there. ... It is now more urgent than ever that the Obama administration end the Bush administration's inhumane and unlawful detention practices in Afghanistan."

But how do we know that the Obama administration is not itself continuing those inhumane practices at Bagram? Since President Obama also shrouds our prison there in Cheney-style secrecy, the ACLU is trying very hard to find out exactly what is happening there.

On April 23, the ACLU Foundation sent a request under the Freedom of Information Act, stating that concerning the Bagram Theater Interment Facility at Bagram Airfield in Afghanistan:

"A federal judge recently observed that the 'process at Bagram falls well short of what the Supreme Court found inadequate at Guantanamo.'" That Supreme Court found the forbidding of those prisoners' habeas corpus rights in our courts was unconstitutional.

Moreover, the ACLU continued, there is growing public concern here that "the U.S. government is holding many prisoners at Bagram, rather than at Guantanamo (still open), specifically to avoid any judicial review of their detentions in U.S. courts."

What has happened to Obama's repeated pledge to ensure "the most transparent administration in American history?"

This is ACLU Freedom of Information request, Mr. President, calls your attention to the widespread "Media reports (which) suggest that the conditions of confinement at Bagram are primitive and that abuse and mistreatment of prisoners was once, and MAY STILL BE, widespread."

On July 8, The Public Record's William Fisher (www.pubrecord.org) revealed that the International Committee of the Red Cross - from sources it cannot reveal (so it can keep them) - recently, in a confidential Bagram report, cited "prisoners held 'incommunicado' in 'a previously undisclosed warren of isolation cells' and 'sometimes subjected to cruel treatment in violation of the Geneva Conventions.' ... The Red Cross said that dozens of prisoners have been held incommunicado for weeks or even months, hidden from prison inspectors."

What are their American captors trying to hide from us? From the world? Surely the commander in chief at the White House is kept informed? The ACLU, among much other specific information, wants to get: "All records created after Sept. 11, 2001, pertaining to the treatment of and conditions of confinement for prisoners detained at Bagram, including but not limited to memoranda, correspondence, procedures, policies, directives, guidance, or guidelines, investigatory records, disciplinary records, medical records, and autopsy reports."

The ACLU's Jonathan Hafetz, deeply involved in piercing the Bagram mystery, underscores that "Torture and abuse at Bagram is further evidence that prisoner abuse in U.S. custody was systemic, not aberrational, and originated at the highest levels of government. We must learn the truth about what went wrong, hold the proper people accountable and make sure these failed policies are not continued or repeated."

And to what degree and extent is Obama accountable for what's happening under his watch at Guantanamo?

To be continued. At a presidential press conference, will only reporter Helen Thomas ask the commander in chief a direct question about Bagram?
