

Action, cut! Abu Ghraib pictures stay secret

Written by Eric Walberg



Pornography, the feminisation of the enemy? Confused over Obama's view on Guantanamo and the backlog of torture images from Abu Ghraib? Join the club, laments Eric Walberg

21/5/9 -- The centrepiece of United States President Barack Obama's PR campaign to show the world the US is the nice cop was to end the military tribunals, which he called "an enormous failure" during last year's presidential campaign, and close the infamous Guantanamo prison. This was Obama's first major "achievement" upon assuming office.

So far Guantanamo is still scheduled to be closed by next January, though rumblings were being heard even as Obama took office. It appears there's no place to send the prisoners, most of whom are innocent of anything other than fighting invaders, if that. Congress does not want to allow them to come to stay in equally notorious US jails, where overcrowding, violence, drugs and AIDS are endemic. Nor is Congress willing to fork over any money to close Guantanamo. Of course this is nonsense. Venezuela's president offered to take them all, but Obama dare not accept any favours from someone so principled, lest his house of cards come tumbling down.

As for the tribunals, Obama faces two deadlines: his 120-day review of the tribunals has now ended, and on 27 May the trial of Ahmed Al-Darbi, a Saudi accused of plotting to attack a ship in the Strait of Hormuz, was scheduled to begin, and it appears it now will, but under slightly improved conditions, including restricting hearsay evidence. The tribunals now must move quickly in a race against the clock before Guantanamo is scheduled to be closed next January. If the prison is closed (an increasingly big "if") and the trials are still going on then, the detainees will have to be brought to the US, where they will receive greater legal rights.

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Between 10 and 20 of the 241 detainees currently at Guantanamo will now be tried by military tribunals. Thirteen other detainees already have been moved into the system and are expected to be tried there. The rest of the detainees must either be released, transferred to other nations or tried by civilian prosecutors in US federal courts. It's also possible that some could continue to be held indefinitely as prisoners of war, though government officials insist they will now receive full Geneva Conventions protections.

The decision to persist with the tribunals was immediately attacked by critics. "It's disappointing that Obama is seeking to revive rather than end this failed experiment," said Jonathan Hafetz of the American Civil Liberties Union. "There's no detainee at Guantanamo who cannot be tried and shouldn't be tried in the regular federal courts system."

How did this sorry state of affairs come about so soon after all the fanfare?

Obama stressed to families of victims of the USS Cole attack when he met them in February that he would not free "potential jihadists", but when Binyam Mohamed, suspected in a plot to set off a "dirty bomb" inside the US, was repatriated to Britain where he was released, this was deplored, ignoring that Mohamed was determined to be innocent by the world's oldest upholder of due process. The pressures on Obama to hold the Bush course are immense, with former vice president Richard Cheney brazenly attacking him as a wimp on US television.

Then there's Obama's decision to block the court-ordered release of more torture photos. He was for the pictures being released before deciding last week he was against it, apparently convinced by military officials the photos would increase danger for US troops.

Dawdling, of course, just confirms the view of the rest of the world, especially among Muslims, that Obama is not the principled liberal they were led to expect, that he is afraid to make a clean breast of the past atrocities, that he is merely a politically correct Bush lite. The irony being that, contrary to Cheney's ravings, it is his very indecisiveness that increases the danger for US troops.

The legal intricacies of Guantanamo vs US incarceration and jurisdiction are less sensational than the torture pictures. But the likelihood of many Muslims actually seeing the latest shots of US troops in Iraq sodomising those who resist them is remote. In any case, the pictures were

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originally intended for possible publication by the torturers themselves. This startling revelation was made by Seymour Hersh in 2004 when he exposed the logic behind the officially-condoned US strategy of sexual torture. The idea was to use blackmail to encourage victims to work for the occupiers as spies, threatening to publish the photos unless the victims agreed to collaborate with the occupiers. A government consultant revealed to Hersh, "I was told that the purpose of the photographs was to create an army of informants, people you could insert back in the population."

The strategy, of course, failed spectacularly, and the photos -- old and new -- are being consumed primarily by jingoistic Americans revelling in such scenes of violence inflicted on the "enemy", inured to the monstrosity of this by their regular diet of media violence and Islamophobia. Already the "blocked" photos are being leaked all over the net, making Obama's last minute efforts a fool's errand.

How such unconscionable behaviour became official US policy is fascinating. American pilots were actually trained during the "first" Gulf War by watching pornographic films, according to the Washington Post at the time. In order to better subjugate Arab Iraq, according to Joseph Massad, "American imperial military culture supermasculinises not only its own male soldiers, but also its female soldiers who can partake of the feminisation of Iraqi men." The pornographic pictures are merely the logical outcome of this strategy to subdue the so-called enemy, constructed by diabolical Pentagon strategists. The 2003 invasion updated this strategy, though with unintended consequences, as new technology allowed simple soldiers to produce their own DVDs of their sadistic frolics.

This stark reality is inverted in Washington, as cogently expressed by Obama's envoy of peace to Afghanistan and Pakistan Richard Holbrooke, who told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee about US media efforts in Pakistan: "Concurrent with the insurgency is an information war. We are losing that war." Rather than acknowledging past sins, however, he advocates even more TV and radio propaganda supporting the US wars. Holbrooke is referring to the \$100 million propaganda campaign launched by the Bush regime in Iraq in 2005 by a Washington-based PR firm to plant administration propaganda in the Iraqi news media and to pay Iraqi journalists to write favourable stories about the occupation.

So it appears withholding the Abu Ghraib photos is really part of the US government media war, and that the question mark over Guantanamo is really part of the military plans to continue the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan come hell or high water. And that these policies are not up for discussion. The reversal of Obama's key policies after only a few months does not bode well for him or the US.

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Perhaps withholding the photos is also connected with the appointment of Stanley McChrystal as head of the military in Afghanistan, which should brace itself for more Abu Ghraib-style action. McChrystal cut his teeth in Iraq, where he directed the Pentagon's Joint Special Operations Command's special operation teams, which carry out assassinations and terrorise local populations opposed to the occupation. McChrystal was a favourite of Rumsfeld and Cheney. He was a direct participant in overseeing torture, according to a report by Esquire and Human Rights Watch in 2006.

Just about everyone but the US officials conducting their war on terrorism realise by now that it is this very policy that is producing more and more jihadists, and will continue to produce them until Obama, or some future less timid president, declares an end to this campaign of terror being conducted by the US itself, with its allies dragged kicking and screaming behind it.

This is no time for Obama to be indecisive. Guantanamo must be closed and remaining prisoners must be tried in US courts or repatriated. If that's a problem, he can always take up Chavez's offer. And patch up relations with him and Castro in the process. Hell, why not give back Guantanamo to Cuba as a peace offering while he's at it? The important thing is not to blink while he's doing what's right, or else the jackals of war will chew him to shreds.

The latest fear among Democrats is that the gulf between them and the Republicans is widening, even as Democratic policies are gaining support among the people. Huh? They should take a leaf from FDR's book, to fear nothing but fear alone. Let the Republicans march into the wilderness. Take control of US politics for the next two decades by following truly popular, socially just policies. Americans are not imperialists at heart. They will follow you. And be sure to close Guantanamo.

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