

'US jailers tortured innocent Afghan to death'

21 May 2005

By Victoria Ward, New York

A 22-YEAR-OLD Afghan taxi driver whose only crime was driving past a US base at the wrong time was so badly beaten his legs could no longer bend and chained by the wrists to the ceiling of his cell where he eventually died.

According to a report published yesterday, detainees in United States military custody in Afghanistan were the victims of widespread abuse by "young and poorly trained soldiers."

A 2,000-page confidential file obtained by the New York Times reveals brutal treatment of prisoners, apparently often born out of little more than boredom.

The report focuses on the deaths of two Afghan men in Bagram in December 2002.

In the case of the first, the taxi driver, Dilawar, it was months before Army investigators learned that most of his interrogators believed he was an innocent man who drove his taxi past the American base at the wrong time, according to the report.

The story of Dilawar shows his American jailers continued to torment him even as he was dying.

Dilawar was hauled from his cell at the detention centre in Bagram at around 2 am to answer questions about a rocket attack on an American base. When he arrived in the interrogation room, an interpreter who was present said his legs were bouncing uncontrollably in the plastic chair and his hands were numb. He had been chained by the wrists to the top of his cell for much of the previous four days.

Dilawar asked for a drink of water, and one of the two interrogators, Specialist Joshua R. Claus, 21, picked up a large plastic bottle. But first he punched a hole in the bottom, the interpreter said, so as the prisoner fumbled weakly with the cap, the water poured out over his orange prison scrubs.

The soldier then grabbed the bottle back and began squirting the water forcefully into Dilawar's face.

"Come on, drink!" the interpreter said Mr Claus had shouted, as the prisoner gagged on the spray. "Drink!"

At the interrogators' behest, a guard tried to force the young man to his knees. But his legs, which had been pummelled by guards for several days, could no longer bend. An interrogator told Dilawar that he could see a doctor after they finished with him. When he was finally sent back to his cell, though, the guards were instructed only to chain the prisoner back to the ceiling.

"Leave him up," one of the guards quoted Mr Claus as saying.

Several hours passed before a doctor finally saw Dilawar. By then he was dead, his body beginning to stiffen. It would be many months before army investigators learned a final horrific detail - most of the interrogators had believed Dilawar was an innocent man who simply drove his taxi past the American base at the wrong time.

Another detainee, Habibullah, died there six days earlier, also shackled to the ceiling.

In statements to investigators, soldiers describe one female interrogator stepping on the neck of one detainee and kicking another in the genitals.

Another prisoner was said to have been forced to roll back and forth on the floor, kissing the boots of his two interrogators as he went.

"The Bagram file depicts young, poorly-trained soldiers in repeated incidents of abuse," the New York Times reports.

"The harsh treatment, which has resulted in criminal charges against seven soldiers, went well beyond the two deaths."

The newspaper said it had obtained a copy of the file from someone involved in the investigation who was critical of the methods used at Bagram and the military's response to the deaths.

The army's Criminal Investigation Command concluded last October that the Dilawar and Habibullah incidents implicated 28 officers. Seven were later charged.

Pentagon spokesperson, Lieutenant Colonel John Skinner, said the "comprehensive" investigation was indicative of how seriously such reports were taken.

"The humane treatment of detainees has always been our standard," he said.

"In context there was a relatively small number of incidents."

[\[FRONT PAGE \]](#) [\[BACK \]](#)

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