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Amnesty attacks US 'disappearances'

Peter Walker
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The United States' reported use of secret CIA-run prisons for terrorism suspects amounts to a policy of "disappearances", human rights watchdog Amnesty International said today in its annual report.

In a sometimes scathing assessment of Washington's rights record, the London-based group also raised serious concerns about detainees held without trial in Guantanamo Bay, Iraq and Afghanistan.

Washington had failed to bring to account those potentially guilty of war crimes or crimes against humanity, it added.

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Britain also faced condemnation, with Amnesty saying the government had "continued to erode fundamental human rights" through new anti-terrorism laws and the possible use of evidence obtained through the torture of suspects in other countries.

The 238-page report for 2005 carries a lengthy catalogue of abuses in dozens of countries, with some of the most-criticised including China, North Korea, Zimbabwe and Russia.

While Washington traditionally dismisses such complaints - President Bush labelled last year's Amnesty report "absurd" for likening Guantanamo Bay to a gulag - it

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remains embarrassing for the US to be bracketed in such company.

The latest document considers widespread reports that the CIA has run a network of secret detention centres in countries including Afghanistan, Poland and Romania, transporting suspects via unlisted 'rendition' flights.

"Such facilities were alleged to detain individuals incommunicado outside the protection of the law in circumstances amounting to 'disappearances'," Amnesty noted, saying it had spoken to three Yemeni detainees held in secret locations for up to 18 months.

"Their cases suggested that such detentions were not confined to a small number of 'high value' detainees as previously suspected."

Amnesty also warned of increasing evidence of torture and ill-treatment of detainees in Iraq, Afghanistan and the US-run prison in Guantanamo Bay, which the rights group has repeatedly demanded be closed.

"Despite evidence that the US government had sanctioned interrogation techniques constituting torture or ill-treatment, and 'disappearances', there was a failure to hold officials at the highest levels accountable, including individuals who may have been guilty of war crimes or crimes against humanity," Amnesty said.

In an almost equally lengthy entry for Britain, Amnesty condemned the Prevention of Terrorism Act passed by Tony Blair's government last year, saying it "allowed for violations of a wide range of human rights" such as control orders against terrorism suspects.

"The imposition of 'control orders' was tantamount to the executive charging, trying and sentencing a person without the fair trial guarantees required in criminal cases," Amnesty noted.

It also raised concerns at the death last July of Jean Charles de Menezes, the young Brazilian electrician shot dead by police at Stockwell Underground station in south London after being mistaken for a suicide bomber.

"Evidence emerged giving rise to suspicion of an early attempt at a cover-up by the police," Amnesty said.

There were also harsh words for the US and Britain over the actions of their troops and allies in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"Both the US-led Multinational Force (MNF) and Iraqi security forces committed grave human rights violations, including torture and ill-treatment, arbitrary detention without charge or trial, and excessive use of force resulting in civilian deaths," Amnesty said, while noting that insurgents were "responsible for grave human rights abuses".

In Afghanistan, US forces "continued to arbitrarily detain hundreds of people beyond the reach of the courts and their own families".

More generally, almost five years after the Taliban regime was ousted, "the (Afghan) government and its international partners remained incapable of providing security to the people".

China - which routinely dismisses allegations - was heavily

condemned for no real change in its appalling rights record, despite some limited legal and judicial reforms.

"Tens of thousands of people continued to be detained in violation of their human rights and were at risk of torture or ill-treatment," Amnesty said.

Freedoms were especially restricted in Tibet and Xinjiang, the Muslim-majority region in far-west China where dissent has been severely repressed under the guise of a "war on terror", the report noted.

Widespread abuses in long-time dictatorships North Korea and Burma were also listed at length, while the regime of Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe was condemned for "widespread and systematic violations of the rights to shelter, food, freedom of movement and residence, and the protection of the law".

Sudan's government was cited for allowing "grave abuses of human rights" by both government forces and government-allied militias in its western region of Darfur.

Russia was also given a long entry, listing complaints ranging from racist attacks and ill-treatment in prisons to "serious human rights abuses" such as torture and killings in Chechnya. "Impunity remained the norm for those committing human rights violations," Amnesty noted.

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