

Extraordinary Rendition

Britain's Central Role

Ben Griffin

This statement was prepared and read by Ben Griffin, ex-Special Air Service (SAS) soldier, at a press conference in London on 25 February 2008.

Our government would have us believe that our involvement in the process known as Extraordinary Rendition is limited to two occasions on which planes carrying detainees landed to refuel on the British Indian Ocean Territory, Diego Garcia. David Miliband has stated that the British Government expects the Government of the United States to 'seek permission to render detainees via UK territory and airspace, including Overseas Territories; that we will grant that permission only if we are satisfied that the rendition would accord with UK law and our international obligations; and how we understand our obligations under the UN Convention Against Torture'. (Taken from a statement given to the House of Commons by the Foreign Secretary David Miliband on Thursday 21 February 2008.)

The use of British Territory and airspace pales into insignificance in light of the fact that it has been British soldiers detaining the victims of Extraordinary Rendition in the first place. Since the invasion of Afghanistan in the autumn of 2001, United Kingdom Special Forces (UKSF) has operated within a joint US/UK Task Force. This Task Force has been responsible for the detention of hundreds if not thousands of individuals in Afghanistan and Iraq. Individuals detained by British soldiers within this Task Force have ended up in Guantanamo Bay Detention Camp, Bagram Theatre Internment Facility, Balad Special Forces Base, Camp Nama BIAP and Abu Ghraib Prison.

Whilst the government has stated its desire that the Guantanamo Bay detention camp be closed, it has remained silent over these other secretive prisons in Iraq and Afghanistan. These secretive prisons are part of a global network in which individuals face torture and are held indefinitely without charge. All of this is in direct contravention of the Geneva Conventions, International Law and the UN Convention Against Torture.

Early involvement of UK Special Forces in

the process of Extraordinary Rendition centres around operations carried out in Afghanistan in late 2001. Of note is an incident at the Qalai Janghi fortress, near Mazar-i-Sharif. UK Special Forces fought alongside their US counterparts to put down a bloody revolt by captured Taliban fighters. The surviving Taliban fighters were then rendered to Guantanamo Bay.

After the invasion of Iraq in 2003 this joint US/UK task force appeared. Its primary mission was to kill or capture high value targets. Individuals detained by this Task Force often included non-combatants caught up in the search for high value targets. The use of secret detention centres within Iraq has negated the need to use Guantanamo Bay whilst allowing similar practice to go unnoticed.

I have here an account taken from an interpreter interviewed by the organisation Human Rights Watch (<http://hrw.org/reports/2006/us0706/2.htm>). He was based at the detention and interrogation facility within Camp Nama at Baghdad International Airport during 2004. This facility was used to interrogate individuals captured by the joint US/UK Task Force. In it are the details of numerous breaches of the Geneva Convention and accounts of torture. These breaches were not the actions of rogue elements: the abuse was systematic and sanctioned through the chain of command. This account is corroborated by an investigation carried out by *New York Times* reporters into Camp Nama and the US/UK Task Force, which appeared in the *New York Times* on 19 March 2006. Throughout my time in Iraq I was in no doubt that individuals detained by UK Special Forces and handed over to our American colleagues would be tortured. During my time as member of the US/UK Task Force, three soldiers recounted to me an incident in which they had witnessed the brutal interrogation of two detainees. Partial drowning and an electric cattle prod were used during this interrogation and this amounted to torture. It was the widely held assumption that this would be the fate of any individuals handed over to our America colleagues. My commanding officer at the time expressed his concern to the whole squadron that we were becoming 'the secret police of Baghdad'.

As UK soldiers within this Task Force a policy that we would detain individuals but not arrest them was continually enforced. Since it was commonly assumed by my colleagues that anyone we detained would subsequently be tortured, this policy of detention and not arrest was regarded as a clumsy legal tool used to distance British soldiers from the whole process.

During the many operations conducted to apprehend high value targets, numerous non-combatants were detained and interrogated in direct contravention of the Geneva Convention regarding the treatment of civilians in occupied territories. I have no doubt in my mind that non-combatants I personally detained were handed over to the Americans and subsequently tortured.

The joint US/UK Task Force has broken International Law, contravened the Geneva Conventions and disregarded the UN Convention Against Torture. British soldiers are intimately involved in the actions of this Task Force. Jack Straw, Margaret Beckett David Miliband, Geoff Hoon, Des Browne, Tony Blair, Gordon Brown – in their respective positions over the last five years they must know that

British soldiers have been operating within this joint US/UK task force. They must have been briefed on the actions of this unit.

As the occupiers of Iraq we have a duty to uphold the law, to abide by the Geneva Conventions and the UN Convention Against Torture. We are also responsible for securing the borders of Iraq. On all counts we have failed. The British Army once had a reputation for playing by the rules. That reputation has been tarnished over the last seven years. We have accepted illegality as the norm. I have no doubt that over the coming months and years increasing amounts of information concerning the actions of British soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan will become public.

Whilst the majority of British Forces have been withdrawn from Iraq, UK Special Forces remain within the US/UK Task Force.

*Torture, according to the United Nations Convention Against Torture, is 'any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession'.

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On the evening of Thursday 28 February, the Ministry of Defence obtained an injunction from the High Court silencing Mr Griffin after he had given a number of interviews to the national press about rendition and torture in Iraq and elsewhere. On 29 February, Mr Justice Openshaw continued the injunction. Ben Griffin commented:

'As of 1940hrs 29/02/08 I have been placed under an injunction preventing me from speaking publicly and publishing material gained as a result of my service in UKSF (SAS).

I will be continuing to collect evidence and opinion on British involvement in extraordinary rendition, torture, secret detentions, extra judicial detention, use of evidence gained through torture, breaches of the Geneva Conventions, breaches of International Law and failure to abide by our obligations as per UN Convention Against Torture. I am carrying on regardless.'