

Secret World of US Jails

By Jason Burke
The Observer U.K.

Sunday 13 June 2004

Jason Burke charts the worldwide hidden network of prisons where more than 3,000 al-Qaeda suspects have been held without trial - and many subjected to torture - since 9/11.

The United States government, in conjunction with key allies, is running an "invisible" network of prisons and detention centres into which thousands of suspects have disappeared without trace since the "war on terror" began.

In the past three years, thousands of alleged militants have been transferred around the world by American, Arab and Far Eastern security services, often in secret operations that by-pass extradition laws. The astonishing traffic has seen many, including British citizens, sent from the West to countries where they can be tortured to extract information. Anything learnt is passed on to the US and, in some cases, reaches British intelligence.

The disclosure of the shadowy system will increase pressure on the Bush administration over its "cavalier" approach to human rights and will embarrass Tony Blair, a staunch ally of President George Bush.

The practice of "renditions" - when suspects are handed directly into the custody of another state without due process - has sparked particular anger. At least 70 such transfers have occurred, according to CIA sources. Many involve men who have been freed by the courts and are thus legally innocent. Renditions are often used when American interrogators believe that harsh treatment - banned in their own country - would produce results.

The Observer has obtained details of two incidents in which men have been detained by the US despite being found innocent by courts in their own country. In one, a British businessman called Wahab al-Rami, an Iraqi living in the UK and a Palestinian seeking asylum were arrested by US and local officers in Gambia in November 2002 as they stepped off a flight from London.

Their seizure, which followed a tip-off from the UK security services - came just days after they had been arrested by British police on suspicion of terrorism and then freed by a British court.

Two were transported from Gambia to Guantanamo Bay - where they remain today - without any legal process. In the other incident, two Turks, a Saudi, a Kenyan and a Sudanese man were arrested in Malawi in June 2003 on suspicion of funding terrorist networks. Though freed by local courts, the men were handed over to the CIA and held for several months. Campaigners say these incidents are "the tip of an iceberg."

Few escape the ghost network of detention facilities, which range from massive prison camps such as that at Guantanamo Bay to naval vessels in the Indian Ocean, so accounts of life inside the new gulag are rare.

One of the most harrowing stories concerns a Syrian-born Canadian, Maher Arar, who was arrested by US authorities in late 2002 during a stopover in New York, on suspicion of terrorist activities.

After several days of questioning, the 34-year-old IT specialist was flown to Jordan, where the CIA passed him on to local security officials. He was repeatedly assaulted in Jordan before being

driven to Syria, where he was kept in solitary confinement in a 6ft by 3ft cell for several months and repeatedly beaten with cables. All charges were dropped on his release. Arar said last week that he was "trying to rebuild [his] life."

"I never did anything to make me a suspect. I could not believe they would send me back to Syria, but they did," he said. "They sent me back to be tortured."

The ghost prison network stretches around the globe. The biggest American-run facilities are at the Bagram airbase, north of Kabul in Afghanistan, Guantanamo Bay, where around 400 men are held, and in Iraq, where tens of thousands of detainees are held. Saddam Hussein and dozens of top Baath party officials are held in a prison at Baghdad airport.

However, Washington is relying heavily on allies. In Morocco, scores of detainees once held by the Americans are believed to be held at the al-Tamara interrogation centre sited in a forest five miles outside the capital, Rabat. Many of the detainees were originally captured by the Pakistani authorities, who passed them on to the Americans.

One is Abdallah Tabarak, a militant who is alleged to have been Osama bin Laden's bodyguard and was seized in late 2001 by the Pakistanis. Tabarak was handed over to US agents, sent to Bagram and then to Guantanamo, before being flown to Morocco. Last November, Amnesty International criticised the "sharp rise" in torture during 2003 in Moroccan prisons.

In Syria, detainees sent by Washington are held at "the Palestine wing" of the main intelligence headquarters and a series of jails in Damascus and other cities. Egypt has also received a steady flow of militants from American installations. Many other militants have been sent to Egypt by other countries through transfers assisted by the Americans, often using planes run by the CIA.

In Cairo, prisoners are kept in the interrogation centre in the general intelligence directorate in Lazoughli and in Mulhaq al-Mazra prison, according to Montasser al-Zayat, an Islamist lawyer in Cairo and former spokesman for outlawed militant groups.

Terrorists have also been sent to facilities in Baku, Azerbaijan, and to unidentified locations in Thailand. Scores more are thought to be at a US airbase in the Gulf state of Qatar, and a large number are believed to have been sent to Saudi Arabia, where CIA agents are allowed to sit in on some of the interrogations. Elsewhere, security officials merely provide the Americans with summaries.

The fate of high-value prisoners - such as those directly connected to the 11 September attacks or other al-Qaeda strikes, or senior aides of bin Laden - is unknown. Abu Zubaydah, the Palestinian-born al-Qaeda logistics expert, was arrested after a shoot-out in the Pakistani city of Faisalabad in March 2002 by a joint team of American and Pakistani special forces.

After a brief interrogation, Abu Zubayda was handed over to the Americans, who took him to Bagram and then, it is believed, flew him on to Jordan, where he has been held, along with several other high-value prisoners, in prisons in the capital, Amman, and in desert locations in the east of the country. Jordanian investigators are seen as "professional" by Western intelligence services, although the nation has been repeatedly criticised for its human rights record.

Khaled Sheikh Mohammed and Ramzi bin al-Shibh, who both helped plan the 11 September attacks, were also transferred to American custody soon after their capture by Pakistani security forces in September 2002 and March 2003 respectively. They are believed to have been interrogated in Thailand.

The whereabouts of Riduan Isamuddin, the Indonesian activist dubbed "the bin Laden of the Far East," who was passed to the Americans following arrest by Thai security forces in August last year, are unknown. Jabarah Mohamed Mansur, allegedly involved in an attempt to bomb the US and Israeli embassies in Singapore, is reported to have been interrogated in Oman.

What is clear is that the Americans are prepared to go to extraordinary lengths to capture suspects and to ensure that they are taken to an environment where information can be extracted as speedily as possible.

In March 2003, FBI agents kidnapped a Yemeni al-Qaeda suspect from a hospital in Mogadishu, where he was being treated for gunshot wounds. Two months earlier, a sophisticated operation involving a fake charity lured a 54-year-old Yemeni to Germany, where he was detained and later extradited to the US. To seize Mohammed Iqbal Madni, a suspected al-Qaeda operative, in Indonesia, US investigators worked three states' legal systems to provide an excuse to pick up the 24-year-old Pakistani. They then flew him to Cairo on a private US-run jet.

The exact number of prisoners held by the Americans or their allies is unknown, but US officials claim that more than 3,000 al-Qaeda militants have been arrested since 11 September. Only around 350 are held in Guantanamo Bay. Very few have been released.

The incarceration of prisoners captured by the Americans in jails in the Middle East has enraged militants. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the Jordanian-born terrorist leader who is active in Iraq, said in April that prisons in his native land had become "the Arab Guantanamo."

"Whoever the Americans find hard to investigate in Pakistan and Afghanistan, they move to Jordan, where they are tortured in every way," he said.

American officials are unrepentant. "You have to break eggs to make omelettes," said one last week. "The world is a bad place."

And Cofer Black, then head of the CIA counter-terrorist centre, said last year that "there was a before 9/11 and an after 9/11. After 9/11, the gloves came off."

But former intelligence officers criticised the new tactics last week. Milton Bearden, who ended a 30-year career with the CIA in 1994, said that coercion did not work.

"You just get all kinds of confessions that turn out to be completely untrue," he said. "And rendition to someone who will torture a suspect is as bad as doing it yourself."

Wahab al-Rawi, whose brother is still being held in Guantanamo Bay, said that he was angry at both the British government and the US government.

"I just want to know how my own government can just give me up to the Americans. Who do these people answer to?"

"I just ask God to punish them, because there is no power on earth that they seem to be afraid of."

<http://observer.guardian.co.uk/international/story/0,6903,1237589,00.html>