

US rendition survivors urge Obama to declassify torture report

Ten survivors write open letter to president and say disclosure of report is 'necessary part of correcting America's own history'



Spencer Ackerman in New York

theguardian.com, Thursday 28 August 2014 19.36 BST



Abdul Hakim Belhaj: 'I ask that there be admission of what went on, or at least an apology for it.'

Photograph: Marco Longari/AFP/Getty Images

Abou Elkassim Britel can't sleep, or he sleeps too much; it varies. He backs out of commitments. The Islamic website he wants to publish from his Italian home remains unfinished.

"I would add," he said through translation, "that I cannot think of the future."

The doctors tell Britel that he has post-traumatic stress disorder, after a decade-long ordeal of imprisonment without charge or transfer and abuse. It began in 2002, when the United States packed him onto a contractor's Gulfstream V in Pakistan and flew him to Morocco.

Britel survived what the US calls rendition, an extrajudicial process of transferring a detainee for "interrogation" in a foreign country. Allies of the US beat Britel with a cricket bat, shoved a bottle into his anus, denied him access to lawyers and Italian diplomats and unceremoniously released him in 2011, as if nothing ever happened.

"Rendition is a series of shocking events, one worse than the other," he said.

The latest shock comes from Washington, in the form of a long-delayed Senate intelligence committee report into the CIA's post-9/11 torture. Britel and nine other rendition survivors want to see their names in it, a measure they consider necessary both for accountability and for their own closure. In an open letter to Barack Obama on Thursday, coordinated by human rights group Reprieve, they urge the report's thorough and prompt declassification.

"I ask that there be admission of what went on or an apology for it," said Abdul Hakim Belhadj, once the commander of the infamous Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, whose allies against Muammar Gaddafi included al-Qaida.

Belhadj, who agreed to a phone interview through translation in Tripoli, is now an Islamist politician in war-torn Libya ("We have a sort of acceptable stability in the field at the moment," he said.) In 2004, the CIA helped deliver him from a Bangkok airport into one of Gaddafi's prisons. In 2011, after more than six years in prison, he tacitly fought beside the US in the war to oust the dictator.

While most attention surrounding the report has focused on abuses the CIA implemented, less has concerned abuses others committed on America's behalf and with its complicity.

Three of the Middle East's most brutal and hated dictators participated fulsomely in pre- and post-9/11 renditions: Gaddafi, Hosni Mubarak of Egypt and Bashar al-Assad of Syria. Though the CIA cultivated robust relationships with their security services, cemented around counter-terrorism, the US would later abandon Mubarak, aid in Gaddafi's overthrow and killing, and come within a hair's breadth last year of attacking Assad.

Through those alliances, the US secretly permitted the architecture of rendition to encompass their partners' enemies. Documents recovered by Human Rights Watch in the aftermath of Gaddafi's overthrow showed the US capturing and interrogating Gaddafi's opponents in the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, whose ties to al-Qaida were nuanced and transactional, and then rendering them to Gaddafi.

"Interrogation" entailed, among other things, being sealed inside a small "confinement box," repeated beatings and waterboarding – all within CIA custody, and all before transference to Gaddafi's prisons for even more brutal treatment.

"At that time, there was an agreement between Gaddafi and the US and UK to return political opponents to him," Belhadj said.

Belhadj was one of them. After traveling to Afghanistan before 9/11, where he was reputed to have met Taliban leader Mullah Omar – "At no point have I ever engaged in any terrorist activity," he insisted – he settled in Malaysia and applied for political asylum in the UK. In 2004, he was snatched at the Bangkok airport, with his wife, by men he believes to have been CIA agents.

A 2004-era document recovered from Gaddafi's security services after his downfall, believed to be written by the CIA, reads: "Our service is committed to rendering the terrorist Abu Abdullah al-Sadiq to your custody. To this end, we have been in touch with the Malaysian authorities to help facilitate the transfer of custody in a timely [sic] manner." Abu Abdullah al-Sadiq was Belhadj's nom de guerre.

"They seized me there. That was where I was started to be beaten, as was my pregnant wife," he said. "They questioned me about knowledge of any terrorist activities, knowledge of bin Laden, things like that." Britel said he faced the same sort of questions.

It would be the start of more than six years Belhadj would spend inside Libyan prisons, including the infamous Abou Salim jail. Five of those years, he said, were spent in isolation, without even yard privileges. "Conditions were extremely difficult," he said.

Those who survived rendition and wrote Thursday's open letter believe disclosure of the report is a "necessary part of correcting America's own history," a step toward preventing the next US lapse into an embrace of torture.

"Today in America, the architects of the torture program declare on television they did the right thing. High-profile politicians tell assembled Americans that 'waterboarding' is a 'baptism' that American forces should still engage in," they write.

But disclosure is taking a circuitous path before completion.

On Wednesday, the Justice Department asked a judge in a freedom of information case to delay until late September ordering the release of documents peripheral to the torture report, including the CIA's rebuttal. The request was largely predicated on a letter Senator Dianne Feinstein, the architect of the report, wrote to the attorney general expecting "a mutually agreeable version of those documents for public release" by 29 September.

While Feinstein and the CIA have reached the nadir of their relationship – the CIA intends to attack her report’s credibility – there are concerns that the CIA has weighed the scale in favor of secrecy. Obama allowed it to lead the declassification review, despite its interest in keeping the report secret. McClatchy reported this week that the main declassification interlocutor with Feinstein, top intelligence lawyer Robert Litt, represented CIA clients in private practice in undisclosed lawsuits.

“We believe the public should know the full story of what took place in the CIA’s secret prisons and that all of these documents – the Senate report, the CIA response and the Panetta review should be released to the public,” said Jameel Jaffer, the deputy legal director of the ACLU, which filed the freedom-of-information case. (The Panetta review is a document compiled for former CIA director Leon Panetta apparently detailing and analyzing CIA information provided to Feinstein’s committee.)

“It’s disappointing that the government is seeking further delay, but, given Senator Feinstein’s assurances, we’re hopeful that all of the documents will be released with very limited redactions in September.”

Neither Feinstein’s committee nor the Obama administration ever intended to release the report in full. In April, the Senate panel voted to release only its findings, executive summary and recommendations. It has negotiated censoring the public report within those self-imposed limitations, and reportedly agreed to remove names and specific identifiers for both torture perpetrators and victims.

The 10 rendition survivors object.

“We, some of the torture program’s targets, have real stories, and families, and lives. Americans deserve to know who we are,” they wrote to Obama on Thursday.

“You ended the torture program; in time, your decision to name us will prove equally important. Our families and our countries are waiting to hear from you.”

Like many observers anticipating the release of the Senate torture report, Britel is ambivalent, unsure how much of its contents will be withheld.

“The release could force the countries involved in my rendition to acknowledge their responsibility, or it may be useless. We’ll see,” Britel said.

Source: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/28/us-rendition-obama-torture-report>