

Government Panel in Afghanistan Confirms Widespread Torture of Detainees

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An Afghan government panel on Monday acknowledged widespread torture of detainees, after a two-week investigation of a United Nations report citing rampant abuses.

At a news conference in Kabul, Afghanistan's capital, the panel's director said its inquiry had confirmed evidence that nearly half of the 284 prisoners interviewed in three provinces had been tortured during arrest or questioning. The inquiry also found that many of the detainees never had access to legal defense.

But even though the official, Abdul Qadir Adalatkha, noted that the findings were serious, he insisted that there was no evidence of "systematic torture."

The findings were the first formal acknowledgment by Afghan officials of a widespread problem with abuse, after initial denials when the United Nations report was released on Jan. 20. In a statement, President Hamid Karzai's office said it had received the report and would further discuss it in a meeting with the judiciary on Wednesday.

The United Nations report found that despite intensive international efforts to halt abuses in police and intelligence questioning after a similarly troubling report in 2011, the problem had actually gotten worse, particularly in the Afghan National Police. That force's training and rapid expansion have been overseen by Western officials.

Concerns about torture prompted NATO military forces to stop handing over battlefield detainees to Afghan officials in many places. And the broader issue of detainee transfers has been a lasting point of contention between American officials and Mr. Karzai, who has insisted on complete Afghan authority over detentions.

The international Convention Against Torture, which the United States has signed, prohibits the transfer of a detainee "to another state where there are substantial grounds for believing that he would be in danger of being subjected to torture."

Although rights advocates saw the panel's finding on Monday as an important first step, they expressed doubts about whether the abuses would diminish without stronger actions from the government. Both the departing allied military commander in Afghanistan, Gen. John R. Allen, and United Nations officials noted at the time the report was issued in January that they were aware of almost no cases in which Afghan officials suspected of torture had been punished or even moved.

"It is significant, because it's the first time that the Afghan government is admitting that torture is truly a bigger problem — that it's not just a few bad apples," said Heather Barr, the Afghanistan researcher for Human Rights Watch. "The question is will they actually do anything about it? Are they prepared to find another way to operate?"

Ms. Barr said that the Afghan justice system's nearly complete reliance on confessions to solve cases drove much of the abuse, and that it was unlikely to change despite international training efforts. "Training without accountability doesn't mean anything," she added. "There needs to be the message that people who torture will be fired or demoted — otherwise, there's no incentive to do the right thing."

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