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Closing Gitmo is not enough

By LAUREL E. FLETCHER and ERIC STOVER NOV. 21, 2008

President-elect Barack Obama has pledged to close the notorious Guantánamo prison camp. This will be a first step toward restoring America's reputation abroad, but it must not end there. To ensure that our fight against terrorism is consistent with U.S. laws and values, the new Administration must launch a full investigation into the treatment of detainees held in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba and other U.S. detention centers since the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

We recently published the findings of our study of 62 released Guantánamo detainees from nine different countries. What we found was alarming. Most of the men we interviewed had been arrested or kidnapped and sold to the United States for bounties as small as \$5,000 - simply because their captors said that they were members of Al Qaeda or the Taliban. Our research found that U.S. authorities failed to verify whether these men were really "enemy combatants" and a serious threat to the security of the United States.

Guantánamo is nothing more than an interrogation center where guards and interrogators work together to "break" detainees. Half of the respondents in our study (31 of the 55) willing to discuss their interrogation sessions called them abusive.

They described being subjected to short shackling, stress positions, solitary confinement and exposure to extreme temperatures, loud music and strobe lights - often simultaneously and over long periods of time.

The cumulative effect of these methods constitutes cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment that, in some cases, could amount to torture as defined by the UN Convention Against Torture, which the U.S. ratified in 1994.

Several detainees were driven to despair and tried to kill themselves at Guantánamo,

despite the strict prohibition against suicide in Islam. Twelve of the 18 attorneys we interviewed during the two-year study said that their clients' mental states had deteriorated dramatically as a result of their detention.

Of these, nine explicitly stated that prolonged periods of solitary confinement were particularly damaging to the detainees' psyches. While some prisoners received treatment for their psychological problems, others refused to seek help because medical personnel shared their information with interrogators who used it to coerce prisoners. This practice alone is a flagrant violation of medical ethics.

Over 500 prisoners have been released from Guantánamo since it opened in January 2002, yet not one of them has been convicted of a crime. In the past two months, two detainees still held in Guantánamo have been found guilty by military commissions. A third, David Hicks, pleaded guilty in 2007 and was released after serving the remainder of his sentence in Australia. Government officials have acknowledged to reporters that many - if not the vast majority - of detainees held at Guantánamo should never have been locked up in the first place.

Of those who have been released, many bear a lasting "Guantánamo stigma." Almost two-thirds of the men we interviewed reported deep psychological and emotional scars. Most have been shunned by their communities and families.

Only six of the released detainees we interviewed had jobs. Former businessmen are now bankrupt; their families sold everything and borrowed money to make ends meet. Jobless and penniless, these men can't pay back the loans, and some can't afford to send their children to school.

"Years of my life were wasted over there," one released detainee told us. "I lost the chance of living as a human being; my family lost the chance of being with their father and husband. I lost the chance of being with my children and my wife; a person's life passing by, you never can get that back."

We Americans cannot sweep this ugly chapter in our nation's history under the rug by simply closing the Guantánamo prison camp. The new administration should create an independent, nonpartisan commission comprised of distinguished military, legal and medical experts to investigate U.S. detention and interrogation practices in the "war on terror."

The commission should determine what went wrong and who should be held accountable, and recommend ways to help those falsely imprisoned clear their names and recover from the abuses they have suffered.

Commission members should be armed with subpoena power, given full access to classified

material and be able to conduct their work unhindered by presidential pardons or amnesties designed to shield the culpable from accountability.

We must get at the truth that the Bush administration has tried for so many years to hide. Only then will we restore America's commitment to humane treatment and rule of law.

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