

Occupation is always ugly

by Janet Jagan

"Occupation is always ugly," commented the Arab Director of the Al-Ahram Centre, Abdel-Moneim Said. He was speaking about President George Bush's interview with two Arabic-language television stations on the mistreatment of Iraqi prisoners by US soldiers at Abu Ghraib prison near Baghdad. The impression given by President Bush was that he did "too little too late" and neglected to apologize for the abuses. He did this later, under pressure by the poor response in the Arab world to his interview, again "too late."

I watched President Bush on Television as he gave this interview and observed his face. It was clear that he had been carefully coached on his demeanour and the usual smirk, I call it, on his face, for once was absent.

But it seems, even that and his carefully prepared cautious remarks on the prisoner abuse scandal didn't work. The damage had been done and was unrepairable, as Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld discovered in his evidence before the joint congressional hearing on Capital Hill last week. Despite his remarkably clever defence and willingness to shoulder all the blame, obviously trying to shield his boss President Bush, he still was unable to explain how he had overlooked the significances of the reports on his desk which set out the whole story of the degrading and willful abuse of Iraqi prisoners.

In seeing the almost pornographic pictures of the abused detainees, one thing becomes clear and is probably at the root of what took place. That is the attitude of the American soldiers who committed the atrocities - that the Iraqis are not equal to their oppressors - they are of a lower level of humanity. Certainly, the awful sexual humiliations the victims were forced to suffer, the unbelievable degradation, tells its own story - almost as bad as the "Master Race" of the Nazis.

What stands out in relief in this whole horrible episode is the International Red Cross (IRC), an organization which has to be quiet, diplomatic and inoffensive in order to gain entry in any country, to places kept hidden from public scrutiny. If the IRC comes out with exposes, releases potent information publicly, it loses its opportunities to investigate and help the abused of this world.

In the case of the Iraqi prisoners, both in Iraq and others of many nationalities held at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, the IRC has been quietly warning the US military that prison abuses are taking place. The IRC has now quietly announced that it warned US officials of this abuse in Iraq prisons A YEAR AGO, and significantly, noted that it was not an isolated incident but a "PATTERN," a "systematic pattern of treatment to prisoners," condoned by those in charge of the prisons who supported the abuses.

We know too, and I reported in this column over a year ago, the IRC condemned the treatment of prisoners in the US prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Messrs Bush and Rumsfeld have spoken glibly about observing the Geneva Conventions on the holding of prisoners, but have knowingly and deliberately held the 600 plus prisoners at Guantanamo Bay for over two years without recourse to lawyers or to family visits. No charges have been laid and the prisoners have no way of knowing if they will ever be released.

Reports that I quoted long ago, said that these prisoners, all Muslims, are "softened" up for lengthy periods by denial of better food, conditions, recreation, kept in solitary, etc. for interrogation. It is now believed that the dirty, abusive, sexual humiliation and even murder of prisoners in Iraq was in preparation for interrogation.

Of course, there is irony in the whole vile matter - that the US torture of prisoners took place in the very prison where Saddam Hussein tortured Iraqi prisoners.

The world's greatest democracy faces a great challenge. To clear its name, the US has to do more than talk - it has to demonstrate in no uncertain terms that it really believes what it preaches about human rights. It has to release its prisoners in Iraq and at Guantanamo Bay. It has to end its ugly occupation of Iraq that has led to the death of over 10,000 Iraqi citizens and the injuries to tens of thousands and the losses suffered by American soldiers for a lost cause, a cause that never existed.

Like Vietnam, the US has made a serious mistake in invading another country and hurting its people. The US cannot be the policeman of the world. It must care its own people, the millions living in poverty and slums and unemployment, because, however you slice it - occupation by a foreign power is always ugly, always wrong.

Copyright © Nadira Jagan-Brancier 2009

Cheddi Jagan Research Centre