

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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Independent investigation into alleged UK involvement in torture long overdue

Amnesty International reiterates its call for an independent public inquiry into allegations of UK complicity in torture. The call comes in response to recent statements by the UK Foreign Secretary and Home Secretary regarding intelligence information gained through torture.

The Chief of MI6, the UK's Secret Intelligence Service, has also issued a blanket denial that his officers have been involved in the torture or ill-treatment of terror suspects held overseas. This follows the decision of senior officials to go public last week in the face of mounting evidence that UK agents were involved in the questioning of terrorism suspects in Pakistan and other countries.

Amnesty International believes that the allegations of UK complicity in torture are very serious and cannot be answered by sweeping policy statements. If the government maintains that its agents are not involved in torture then it has nothing to fear from a transparent process that can prove it.

The UK Foreign Secretary, David Miliband, and the Home Secretary, Alan Johnson, reiterated the government's opposition to torture on Sunday. However, they said it was not possible to rule out the risk that some intelligence information gained through mistreatment could be used.

In a joint article published in the Sunday Telegraph, they stated:

"Whether passing information which might lead to suspects being detained; passing questions to be put to detainees; or directly interviewing them, our agencies are required to seek to minimise, and where possible avoid, the risk of mistreatment."

"Enormous effort goes into assessing the risks in each case. Operations have been halted where the risk of mistreatment was too high. But it is not possible to eradicate all risk. Judgments need to be made."

In an interview on a BBC Radio programme, Sir John Scarlett, the chief of MI6, denied UK intelligence officers' involvement in torture. Sir John Scarlett also maintained, however, that the issue of complicity in the torture of suspects abroad must be debated in the context of fight against terrorism.

Amnesty International believes that this statement of current policy offers no clear response to serious allegations of past involvement in securing and using intelligence information gained from the torture and other ill-treatment of terrorism suspects held overseas.

Amnesty International expresses serious concern that these statements by senior UK officials seem conditioned on the idea that torture may just be inevitable in order to protect the public from terrorism, where we have seen that notion backfire time and again in the last eight years. Abiding by human rights will offer the best protection, not setting a bad example and enflaming tensions by being soft on torture.

The public comments by senior officials follow two separate reports in the past week from UK parliamentary committees, both of which expressed grave concern that the UK government had not adequately responded to allegations that the UK authorities had knowledge of and were involved in the mistreatment of terror suspects held overseas.

On 4 August, the UK parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights (JCHR) accused the UK government of being “determined to avoid parliamentary scrutiny” about its knowledge of the torture of terror suspects held by the intelligence services in Pakistan and elsewhere . The JCHR report said that an independent inquiry was the only way to restore public confidence in the intelligence and security agencies.

On 9 August, the UK parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee (FAC) raised its concerns about involvement in the torture and other ill-treatment of terror suspects held abroad. The FAC stated in its annual report: “there is a risk that use of evidence which may have been obtained under torture on a regular basis, especially where it is not clear that protestations about mistreatment have elicited any change in behaviour by foreign intelligence services, could be construed as complicity in such behaviour.”

Amnesty International urges the UK authorities not to pick and choose when they will observe their legal obligations: torture and complicity in torture are absolutely banned. It is high time for the British government to have its record assessed and for those who may be responsible for such serious abuses to be held accountable.

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