

TORTURE FOR US, RETIRE WITH IMPUNITY



Gulalai's face, as seen in photo accompanying Washington Post story on his comfortable life in Southern California.

Torturing on behalf of the United States appears to be a career move that results in a comfortable lifestyle after moving on from government service. Jose Rodriguez, who both ordered up torture and then personally destroyed video evidence of it, now profits from those events through book sales. James Mitchell, who was integral to the design of the torture program, now lives quietly in Land O'Lakes, Florida and until very recently didn't even have to bother talking with reporters, let alone crime investigators. Of course, if you choose to expose US torture, it's prison for you, as John Kiriakou has demonstrated.

But the disgusting free status of Rodriguez and Mitchell pales in comparison to the level of depravity in the known history of personal involvement in torture for Haji Gulalai and how it was revealed yesterday that Gulalai is now living a quiet, comfortable life just outside Los Angeles. [Just as a bit of life advice,

never piss off Julie Tate, as her work in finding Gulalai is perhaps the best bit of investigative journalism in the US in decades.]

Even very early in the US misadventures in Afghanistan, Gulalai was a favorite for the US and its press. Here is a bit from CNN in December of 2001:

Despite intelligence reports indicating the location of Mullah Mohammed Omar, a senior Afghan official said going after the Taliban leader is not a priority.

Haji Gulalai, Kandahar's intelligence chief, said information suggests that Omar is in Helmand province, west of Kandahar, in a district called Baghran.

He says the priority of officials in the Kandahar region is to rebuild the country and the city of Kandahar first, not chasing after Omar.

Gulalai played a special role in development of the Afghan government, eventually becoming, as described in the Post article, Afghanistan's "torturer in chief":

Since its inception, the NDS [National Directorate of Security] has depended on the CIA to such an extent that it is almost a subsidiary – funded, trained and equipped by its American counterpart. The two agencies have shared intelligence, collaborated on operations and traded custody of prisoners.

Gulalai was considered a particularly effective but corrosive figure in this partnership. He was a fierce adversary of the Taliban, officials said, as well as a symbol of the tactics embraced by the NDS.

"He was the torturer in chief," said a senior Western diplomat, who recalled meeting with a prisoner at an NDS

facility in Kabul to investigate how he had been treated when Gulalai entered unannounced. The detainee became agitated and bowed his head in submission. "He was terrified, which made sense," the diplomat said. Gulalai was "a big wheel in a machine that ground up a lot of people."

In setting up the torture program for Afghanistan, Gulalai was paid directly by the CIA:

"It was chaos; you had to start from scratch," said a former senior U.S. intelligence official involved in the effort. The agency equipped the NDS with a fleet of vehicles brought up through Pakistan, delivered office supplies to a Kabul building that the Taliban had trashed and provided a stream of cash to cover payroll. "Money would come in on aircraft, we'd put it through a counting machine and distribute it in duffel bags," said the former U.S. official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss the CIA's role.

Gulalai distinguished himself particularly for his torture in Kandahar:

Twice, U.N. officials persuaded then-NDS Chief Amrullah Saleh to issue orders firing Gulalai. Both times, the orders were undone by ethnic politics, U.N. officials said, as Karzai countermanded the Tajik NDS chief to protect his fellow Pashtun tribesman.

Instead of being dismissed, Gulalai was promoted to NDS headquarters in Kabul and put in charge of the agency's investigations directorate, known at the time as Department 17. The position gave him authority over the main NDS prison in Kabul, to which detainees from across

the country were sent for long-term custody.

Allegations of abuse surged.

Although Gulalai disappeared sometime in 2009, it appears that by 2010 his Department 17 had been specifically banned by the UK for receiving prisoners they captured because of the known torture carried out there.

Standing out especially among the disgusting aspects of Gulalai's case is the mystery surrounding how he was able to enter the US and then be granted asylum. Rank and file interpreters who worked for the US military in Afghanistan (and Iraq) face incredible difficulty getting into the US, even when they can present evidence that they face extreme danger staying behind:

With the looming withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan, thousands of Afghans who have served as military interpreters are in limbo as the State Department works to clear a backlog of SIV [Special Immigrant Visa] applications. Congress had authorized 8,750 visas for Afghan interpreters, but only 1,982 have been issued through Dec. 10.

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The Iraqi Refugee Assistance Project calls the SIV process "prohibitively complicated, bureaucratic and opaque." The group, which also assists Afghans, says more than 5,000 Afghan applicants are backlogged. It says only 6,675 of the 25,000 visas authorized for Iraqi interpreters have been issued.

Congress last month extended the Iraq SIV program through Sept. 30, but failed to extend the Afghan program, which is set to expire Sept. 30.

But here is an even bigger outrage in the process surrounding Gulalai, again from the excellent report from Greg Miller, Julie Tate and Joshua Partlow:

Gulalai has made several return trips to Afghanistan in recent months to sell property there, family members and associates said. If true, the visits could undermine the argument that Afghanistan had become too dangerous for him, potentially complicating his asylum claim.

Just like Rogriguez and Mitchell, Gulalai will never face trial for his many well-documented crimes. Legal and diplomatic barriers magically fade away for those who conduct torture on behalf of the US, and every step is taken to make sure they live out the remainder of their lives in comfortable surroundings.

We can only hope that their sleep is haunted forever by the screams of their victims.