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US must stop 'outsourcing' torture

AN UNMARKED PLANE arrives in the middle of the night carrying men who aren't wearing uniforms but have on black hoods. The men grab prisoners out of the hands of government officials, cut off their clothes, drug them on the spot, shackle them, force the prisoners onto the plane and take off into the night. When the "torture" plane disappears, no one knows where and when the captives will appear and what will happen to them: electrocution, beatings, sexual abuse?

At first guess, you might imagine that this terrible operation is the work of a drug cartel or a rogue member of the "axis of evil," but the scene described involves US officials in a routine part of the Bush administration's practice of "outsourcing torture."

Recently, light has been shed on these dark practices, challenging us to reaffirm the principles on which our country was founded: justice, liberty, and the rule of law. The practice of sending prisoners into the hands of known human rights violators mocks the core values that define who we are and threatens our own soldiers who risk their lives in combat and

could face terrible consequences as prisoners of war.

This extraordinary rendition first gained national attention in September 2002, when Maher Arar, a Canadian citizen, was seized by the US government while on US soil, but then was whisked away to Jordan and later Syria at the request of the CIA. While in Syria, Arar was tortured and held in a dark, 3-by-6-foot cell for nearly a year. He was ultimately released and detailed his story to the media upon his return to Canada. Since that time, other press reports have identified renditions elsewhere around the world, such as the transfer of an Australian citizen, Mamdouh Habib, from Pakistan to Egypt, where he was reportedly tortured.

The clandestine nature of "torture outsourcing" makes it difficult to know the total numbers of those rendered by the Bush administration. In 2002, then-CIA director George Tenet testified to the 9/11 Commission that over 70 people had been subjected to renditions prior to Sept. 11, 2001. CIA operatives interviewed by The New Yorker magazine stated that the

once limited practice of rendition has mushroomed into a worldwide operation of detaining and transferring prisoners outside of any legal structure. One former government official said that over 150 renditions have been conducted since 9/11. This practice goes unmonitored - existing beyond the scope of national or international law. Hidden from daylight, and carried out far from US soil, the issue of third party torture has been swept under the carpet and shielded from public scrutiny.

Last spring, photographs of abuse conducted by American soldiers in Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq shocked the world. President Bush assured the nation that, "torture is never acceptable, nor do we hand over people to countries that do torture." Condoleezza Rice reaffirmed this principle when she told the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations that the United States "will not condone torture."

Yet, Bush administration officials continue to request the rendition of prisoners to countries known to engage in torture. The United States will lose credibility if it continues to export the "dirty

work" of interrogating and abusing terrorist suspects as a tactic in the war on terror.

US Attorney General Alberto Gonzales said there is no guarantee when we hand over prisoners, "once someone is rendered, we can't fully control what that country might do." If we can't control what happens to prisoners who may have vital information affecting US security, then we should not be sending them to the hands of governments like Uzbekistan, a nation known for its practice of submerging prisoners in boiling water. Reports from one prisoner death in Uzbeki custody included wave marks on the torso of the prisoner who died in a boiling vat, after having his teeth smashed and fingernails torn out.

Sending prisoners overseas to extract information through water torture, removal of toenails and fingernails, beatings, and electrocution at the request of US officials is inhumane and must be stopped. If we believe these detainees are terrorists who have intelligence information vital to protecting our country, we should hold and question them ourselves.

Throughout US history we have defeat-

ed brutal enemies, inhumane and monstrous dictators, and met with hideous violence. Our legacy is that we uphold our commitment to justice in the face of terror and war. The test of a nation is found as much in how it wages war as in how it promotes the values of peace and democracy. Our capacity to convince others to take risks for freedom relies on our steadfast dedication to upholding these principles. There will be no victory in this war, if the values of democracy, justice and rule of law are lost in the battle.

The symbol of American justice is the Greek goddess Themis, a blindfolded woman, the very image of the equal administration of the law, without corruption, prejudice, or favor. We must not replace the goddess bearing the scales of justice with the images of abuse: shackles, electrical wires, and torture chambers. Abhorring torture, in deed as well as word, is a moral principle in a world yearning for moral footing. The United States should be a proud voice for justice and democracy, not a participant in the stealthy, illegal, and reprehensible practice of "outsourcing" torture.

US Representative Edward J. Markey, Democrat of Massachusetts, introduced Bill HR 952 to eliminate the practice of "outsourcing torture" on Feb. 17.