

Guantanamo, a 'giant human exp

By Khalid Hasan

WASHINGTON: Guantanamo "appears to be one giant human experiment," according to the lawyer of one of the detainees.

In an interview, Jane Mayer, author of a New Yorker piece on the controversial US detention facility, published by the New Yorker this week, said the chief focus of Guantánamo is to gain "actionable intelligence" by interrogating the detainees. Everything there is geared towards this end.

The reason that some critics have called it a giant psychological experiment is that US military officials have deployed Behavioral Science Consultation Teams, or BSCTS, to help devise and implement interrogation strategies - a melding of psychology and military intelligence. The psychologists and psychiatrists who work in these BSCTS apparently develop individually tailored psychological approach-

es aimed at creating rapport with - or, if necessary, breaking the resistance of - each detainee.

Another technique employed at Guantanamo is the US military's Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape program, known by its acronym, SERE which trains soldiers in how to resist coercive interrogations. But since 9/11, these same behavioral scientists began to "reverse engineer" the process. Instead of teaching resistance, they used their skills to help overcome resistance in US-held detainees.

The New Yorker writer said in answer to another question that when the commanders in Guantánamo wanted permission to use more coercive interrogation methods than those allowed under the US Military Code of Justice, their requests went up to Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld, which is where responsibility resides if and where these

methods were employed.

Asked what the legal status of prisoners at Guantánamo Bay is and what, under international law, the United States' obligations are, Ms Mayer replied that under the Geneva Conventions, which the Bush Administration decided not to abide by in its treatment of the Guantánamo prisoners, they would have had to do things "very differently." She explained that the 1949 Geneva Convention requires the establishment of a "competent tribunal" to determine, on a case-by-case basis, if there is any doubt, whether a detainee should be designated a PoW.

But when US forces captured Al Qaeda and Taliban soldiers in late 2001 and early 2002, in Afghanistan, they were never given individual status-review hearings. If Geneva was followed the US-held prisoners would not have had to answer questions beyond their

name, rank, and serial number. In most cases, Geneva disallows any harsher treatment for prisoners who are non-cooperative. As such, the whole system of rewards and punishments that has been devised at Guantánamo would be out of bounds.

Geneva also specifically bars coercive interrogations. And it also bars medical personnel from conducting "experiments" on prisoners.

Ms Mayer said the only truly non-partisan experts who have been allowed inside Guantánamo, and given access to the detainees there, are inspectors with the International Committee of the Red Cross. Their findings are confidential, shared only with the government. But several of their reports have been leaked, and what they have shown has been "disconcerting." The Red Cross has termed the treatment of detainees in Guantánamo in the recent past as "tanta-

mount to torture."

She said the Bush administration never anticipated the presence of lawyers at Guantanamo and originally argued that the detainees had no right to representation. There have been changes since and although only a few dozen lawyers have been allowed limited visits with their clients in the camp, they have brought outside pressure on the military to improve conditions.

Asked what kind of line can be drawn between the treatment of prisoners in Guantánamo and the abuses at Abu Ghraib, Ms Mayer replied, "One obvious line is the career trajectory of General Geoffrey D Miller, who was commander first in Guantánamo, and then was sent to Iraq to oversee Abu Ghraib. It was General Miller who created the BSCTS to aid in interrogations. He imported the BSCTS idea with him when he went to Iraq. Some

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suggest the SERE techniques migrated this way, as well.

As to how good the internal military inquiries into the treatment of prisoners at Guantánamo have been, she answered that the most recent report by Vice-Admiral Albert T Church III, is still almost "entirely classified." His conclusion, that abuse of detainees was an aberration, rather than the result of any policy, is disputable given the systematic way in which the SERE curriculum seems to have been adapted to interrogation uses in Cuba, Iraq, and elsewhere.

Answering a question as to the effectiveness of torture, the New Yorker writer said, "Many experts think so." She added that an interesting case study involves the alleged 20th 9/11 hijacker, Mohammed al-Qahtani. He was subjected to extremely harsh interrogation, which some would define as torture. In the end, he con-

fessed that he was, as suspected, sent by Al Qaeda to assist in the 9/11 attacks. The irony was that traditional non-coercive legal methods had already proved that to US law-enforcement authorities. Qahtani was stopped in Orlando, Florida, by an alert immigration agent, who refused him entry based on doubts about his reason for entering the country.

After he was later captured in Afghanistan, he was sent to Guantánamo, where he refused to give his name. A fingerprint check identified him, and a subsequent search of phone and parking records revealed that he was connected to Mohammed Atta. None of this required torture. It just required smart and legal police work. "So, after months of extremely harsh treatment, Qahtani essentially confirmed what the government already knew about him," she pointed out.