

3,000 held in

LONDON: United States government, in conjunction with key allies, is running an "invisible" network of prisons and detention centres into which thousands of suspects have disappeared without trace since the "war on terror" began.

In the past three years, thousands of alleged militants have been transferred around the world by American, Arab and Far Eastern security services, often in secret operations that bypass extradition laws. The astonishing traffic has seen many sent from the West to countries where they can be tortured to extract information. Anything learnt is passed on to the US.

The disclosure of the shadowy system will increase pressure on the Bush administration over its "cavalier" approach to human rights and will embarrass Britain's Tony Blair, a staunch ally of President George Bush.

The practice of "renditions" — when suspects are handed directly into the custody of another state without due process — has sparked particular anger. At least 70 such transfers have occurred, according to CIA sources. Many involve men who have been freed by the courts and are thus legally innocent. Renditions are often used when American interrogators believe that harsh treatment —

banned in their own country — would produce results.

We have obtained details of two incidents in which men have been detained by the US despite being found innocent by courts in their own country. In one, a British businessman called Wahab al-Rami, an Iraqi living in the UK and a Palestinian seeking asylum were arrested by US and local officers in Gambia in November 2002 as they stepped off a flight from London.

Their seizure, which followed a tip-off from the UK security services — came just days after they had been arrested by British police on suspicion of terrorism and then freed by a British court.

Two were transported from Gambia to Guantanamo Bay — where they remain today — without any legal process. In the other incident, two Turks, a Saudi, a Kenyan and a Sudanese man were arrested in Malawi in June 2003 on suspicion of funding terrorist networks. Though freed by local courts, the men were handed over to the CIA and held for several months. Campaigners say these incidents are "the tip of an iceberg".

Few escape the ghost network of detention facilities, which range from

massive prison camps such as that at Guantanamo Bay to naval vessels in the Indian Ocean, so accounts of life inside the new gulag are rare.

One of the most harrowing stories concerns a Syrian-born Canadian, Maher Arar, who was arrested by US authorities in late 2002 during a stopover in New York, on suspicion of terrorist activities.

After several days of questioning, the 34-year-old IT specialist was flown to Jordan, where the CIA passed him on to local security officials. He was repeatedly assaulted in Jordan before being driven to Syria, where he was kept in solitary confinement in a 6ft by 3ft cell for several months and repeatedly beaten with cables. All charges were dropped on his release. Arar said last week that he was "trying to rebuild [his] life". "I never did anything to make me a suspect. I could not believe they would send me back to Syria, but they did," he said. "They sent me back to be tortured."

The ghost prison network stretches around the globe. The biggest American-run facilities are at the Bagram airbase, north of Kabul in Afghanistan, Guantanamo Bay, where around 400 men are held, and in Iraq, where tens of thousands of detainees are held. Saddam Hussein and dozens

America's global gulag

By Jason Burke

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of top Baath party officials are held in a prison at Baghdad airport.

However, Washington is relying heavily on allies. In Morocco, scores of detainees once held by the Americans are believed to be held at the al-Tamara interrogation centre sited in a forest five miles outside the capital, Rabat.

Abdallah Tabarak, a militant who is alleged to have been Osama bin Laden's bodyguard and was seized in late 2001 in Pakistan. Tabarak was handed over to US agents, sent to Bagram and then to Guantanamo, before being flown to Morocco. Last November, Amnesty International criticized the "sharp rise" in torture during 2003 in Moroccan prisons.

In Syria, detainees sent by Washington are held at "the Palestine wing" of the main intelligence headquarters and a series of jails in Damascus and other cities. Egypt has also received a steady flow of militants from American installations. Many other militants have been sent to Egypt by other countries through transfers assisted by the Americans, often using planes run by the CIA.

In Cairo, prisoners are kept in the interrogation centre in the general intelligence directorate in Lazoughli and in Mulhaq al-Mazra prison,

according to Montasser al-Zayat, an Islamist lawyer in Cairo and former spokesman for outlawed militant groups.

Terrorists have also been sent to facilities in Baku, Azerbaijan, and to unidentified locations in Thailand. Scores more are thought to be at a US airbase in the Gulf state of Qatar, and a large number are believed to have been sent to Saudi Arabia, where CIA agents are allowed to sit in on some of the interrogations. Elsewhere, security officials merely provide the Americans with summaries.

The fate of high-value prisoners — such as those directly connected to the September 11 attacks or other Al Qaeda strikes, or senior aides of Osama — is unknown.

Khaled Sheikh Mohammed and Ramzi bin al-Shibh, who both helped plan the September 11 attacks, were also transferred to American custody soon after their capture by Pakistani security forces in September 2002 and March 2003 respectively. They are believed to have been interrogated in Thailand.

The whereabouts of Riduan Isamuddin, the Indonesian activist dubbed "the bin Laden of the Far East", who was passed to the Americans following arrest by Thai

security forces in August last year, are unknown. Jabarah Mohamed Mansur, allegedly involved in an attempt to bomb the US and Israeli embassies in Singapore, is reported to have been interrogated in Oman.

What is clear is that the Americans are prepared to go to extraordinary lengths to capture suspects and to ensure that they are taken to an environment where information can be extracted as speedily as possible.

In March 2003, FBI agents kidnapped a Yemeni Al Qaeda suspect from a hospital in Mogadishu, where he was being treated for gunshot wounds. Two months earlier, a sophisticated operation involving a fake charity lured a 54-year-old Yemeni to Germany, where he was detained and later extradited to the US.

The exact number of prisoners held by the Americans or their allies is unknown, but US officials claim that more than 3,000 Al Qaeda militants have been arrested since September 11. Only around 350 are held in Guantanamo Bay. Very few have been released.

The incarceration of prisoners captured by the Americans in jails in the Middle East has enraged militants. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the Jordanian-born terrorist leader who is

active in Iraq, said in April that prisoners in his native land had become "the Arab Guantanamo".

"Whoever the Americans find hard to investigate in Pakistan and Afghanistan, they move to Jordan, where they are tortured in every way," he said.

American officials are unrepentant. "You have to break eggs to make omelettes," said one last week. "The world is a bad place."

And Cofer Black, then head of the CIA counter-terrorist centre, said last year that "there was a before 9/11 and an after 9/11. After 9/11, the gloves came off," he told an official hearing.

But former intelligence officers criticized the new tactics last week. Milton Bearden, who ended a 30-year career with the CIA in 1994, said that coercion did not work.

Wahab al-Rawi, whose brother is still being held in Guantanamo Bay, said that he was angry at both the British government and the US government.

"I just want to know how my own government can just give me up to the Americans. Who do these people answer to? I just ask God to punish them, because there is no power on earth that they seem to be afraid of."

—Dawn/The Observer News Service.