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UN torture report should sound alarm bells: HRW

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Human Rights Watch (HRW) on Sunday said the January 20 UN report on detainee torture and abuse should sound alarm bells for the Afghan government to take decisive action to end the sufferings.

In a statement, the New York-based international non-governmental organization that conducts research and advocacy on human rights asked the Afghan government to urgently adopt meaningful steps to end the widespread use of torture in government detention centers.

The UN mission in Afghanistan report released on January 20 found that more than half of 635 pretrial detainees and prisoners convicted on national security grounds experienced torture or ill-treatment in Afghan government custody.

President Hamid Karzai-led administration dismissed as 'exaggerated' the UN findings that concluded government reforms, including better monitoring and training but no dismissals or prosecutions, had not significantly reduced torture.

Instead, officials who engage in torture benefit from complete impunity from prosecution. Two days later the UN report was released, Karzai ordered an investigation to determine whether there were abuses in detention and identify perpetrators.

“The new UN report should sound alarm bells for the Afghan government to take decisive action to end torture,” said Brad Adams, Asia director at Human Rights Watch. “President Karzai needs

to deliver on his recent promise to identify perpetrators of torture, and to make sure those responsible are immediately arrested and prosecuted.”

The report follows an October 2011 UN report documenting systematic and widespread torture in Afghan detention centers. Torture of prisoners in Afghan government custody has been regularly documented over the past decade, including by the Afghan government’s independent human rights commission, as well as by Human Rights Watch and other nongovernmental organizations.

In his January 22 order, Karzai created a taskforce to investigate the report’s findings and respond within two weeks “so that follow-up measures can be taken.” Unfortunately, Human Rights Watch said, the taskforce consists almost entirely of Afghan government officials who have little or no human rights expertise, and includes representatives of the state agencies with the worst records on torture – the Ministry of Interior Affairs and the National Directorate of Security.

“The failure to include representatives of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission and civil society further undermines the credibility of the taskforce,” the HRW said

“This government taskforce is little more than window dressing because it lacks the personnel, expertise and political will to credibly tackle the very serious problem of torture in Afghanistan’s detention facilities,” Adams said. “Afghanistan needs a fully independent and permanent anti-torture body staffed by experienced human rights advocates with the resources and powers to conduct long-term and consistent monitoring and reform.”

The UN report found that torture was most common in detention facilities run by Afghanistan’s intelligence service and police. Since the 2011 report, abuses in police custody have actually increased, while there was some reduction in intelligence service abuses. A quarter of torture victims were children. Almost a third of the 79 interviewees who had been handed over to Afghan authorities by international military forces reported torture or ill-treatment in Afghan custody.

Detainees told the UN investigators that torture was typically used to try to elicit confessions. Fourteen different forms of torture were reported, including suspension from ceilings, prolonged and severe beating including on the soles of the feet, twisting of the genitals of male detainees, electric shock, prolonged standing or forced exercise, prolonged exposure to cold weather, and threats of execution and rape. Many detainees described being subjected to varied and escalating torture if they refused to confess or answer questions in a way that satisfied interrogators.

“It is astonishing that 11 years into the international intervention in Afghanistan, torture remains rampant,” Adams said. “Afghanistan’s international partners should be doing much more to press President Karzai to put in place credible and transparent systems to detect, deter, and punish perpetrators.”