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Report: Afghans allege abuse at secret US jail

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A new report from a U.S. foundation details allegations of detainee abuse as recently as this year from Afghans who say they were held at a secret jail inside the main American military base in Afghanistan.

The U.S. military has long operated a facility to detain those captured in Afghan operations, first inside Bagram Air Field and now right next door. But some former detainees have alleged for years they were held at a smaller, more isolated location at the base, dubbed the "Black Jail."

The military on Thursday denied it ran any such hidden jails and said that all detention facilities are held to the same strict standards of conduct, consistent with U.S. law, Defense Department policy and Common Article III of the Geneva Conventions.

The report released Thursday by the New York-based Open Society Foundations, a grant-making and policy organization founded by liberal billionaire George Soros, lists a host of accusations of mistreatment at the alleged site. Former detainees said they were exposed to excessive cold and light, not given enough food or blankets, deprived of sleep, stripped naked for medical exams and kept from practicing their religion.

If the allegations prove true, they could tarnish the push for detention reform by President Barack Obama. His administration has ushered in improvements in detainee conditions in

Afghanistan although it has been unable to deliver on a campaign promise to close the U.S. military prison at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba.

Among changes made in the past two years in Afghanistan: reporters have been allowed to tour the main facility outside Bagram and sit in on the review boards used by U.S. authorities to determine if a detainee remains a threat. The majority of detainees are now also given access to Afghan lawyers and their case is heard in an Afghan court held at the center.

The report is based on interviews from 18 detainees who say they were held at a facility matching the description of the alleged Black Jail — half of them during 2009 and 2010, after the military had implemented its reforms.

"Given the consistency of the accounts, the Open Society Foundations believes these are genuine areas of concern, and not outliers, that run counter to U.S. rules on detainee treatment," the report says.

"We're not talking about being threatened to death in interrogation with drills to their head, we're talking about run-of-the-mill detention conditions that when seen as a whole create a very troubling pattern," said report author Jonathan Horowitz.

The U.S. has said that it holds detainees at a number of field sites before they are transferred either to Afghan authorities or to the main detention center, but denies the existence of the Black Jail.

"The Department of Defense does not operate any 'secret prisons,'" said Capt. Pamela Kunze, a spokeswoman for the U.S. military task force overseeing detentions in Afghanistan. She noted that while the locations of some facilities for screening detainees are classified, both the Afghan government and the Red Cross are informed about the sites.

The report alleges that conditions at the Black Jail are worse than at other detention facilities in Afghanistan. Several of those interviewed said their cells were so cold and blankets inadequate that their teeth chattered and they couldn't sleep. Bright lights shone 24 hours.

"It was like sleeping in the fridge," one of the former detainees told the researchers.

The Army's Human Intelligence Collector Operations Field Manual says that detainees should not be exposed to "excessive or inadequate heat, light, or ventilation" or given "inadequate bedding or blankets." It also prohibits deprivation of necessary food, orders that detainees must not be prevented from at least four hours of sleep every 24 hours and bans forced nudity.

Many of the interviewed detainees also said they were given food that smelled awful and that they were only able to eat the biscuits supplied with their meals. They also said they

were forcibly stripped for medical exams — despite Muslim and Pashtun tribal sensibilities over revealing the naked body.

Detainees said that while they had access to Qurans and had wall paintings showing the direction of Mecca, they often had difficulty knowing when to pray because they didn't know the time of day and did not have enough water to perform ritual washing before prayer.

Certain detainees also said the Red Cross was blocked from visiting them. The Red Cross has previously said that it has been notified since August 2009 of all people arrested in Afghanistan by international forces.

Bijan Frederic Farnoudi, a Kabul spokesman for the International Committee of the Red Cross, declined to comment directly on those allegations. He said that while access to detainees was a priority for the ICRC, he said it was a matter reserved for the group's confidential dialogue with the detaining authorities.