

Bush Administration Attacks on Amnesty International

By Stephen Zunes | June 7, 2005

In what appears to be a concerted effort to discredit independent human rights advocates, the Bush administration and its allies in the media have been engaging in a series of attacks against Amnesty International, the world's largest human rights organization and winner of the 1977 Nobel Peace Prize.

Amnesty International has received support from literally millions of individuals around the world because of its steadfast defense of civil and political rights against repressive governments regardless of a given regime's ideology, economic system, or strategic alliances. Avoiding politics, Amnesty provides regular reports of the human rights situation in every country in the world based upon certain objective criteria, and focuses its advocacy work on letter-writing campaigns to free individual prisoners.

Such consistent and credible reporting and advocacy to advance the cause of human rights does not sit well with the U.S. government, however, long the world's number one military and financial backer of autocratic regimes and whose armed forces in recent years have engaged in widespread torture, extrajudicial killings, and other violations of international humanitarian law.

Following publication of a report on May 26 criticizing the abuse of prisoners by the U.S. military in detention facilities in Iraq and elsewhere, Vice President Dick Cheney blithely dismissed Amnesty International's well-documented findings, saying "I frankly just don't take them seriously." White House spokesman Scott McClellan claimed that the detailed accounting of U.S. human rights violations was "ridiculous and unsupported by the facts," while Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice declared that Amnesty's report was "absurd."

President George W. Bush, in a press conference May 31, similarly referred to it as "an absurd report" and implied that the 44-year-old human rights

organization was being used by terrorists and those "who hate America."

Ironically, at the time of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, top Bush administration officials were regularly citing Amnesty International's human rights reports as evidence of the perfidy of Saddam Hussein's regime. For example, in reference to the Iraqi government, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld asserted that "We know that it's a repressive regime" as a result of reports by Amnesty International and other human rights organizations "about how the regime of Saddam Hussein treats his people." Rumsfeld added that a "careful reading" of Amnesty International's reports document "the viciousness of that regime."

It is one thing to criticize human rights abuses by foreign governments the Bush administration seeks to overthrow, and it is quite another thing to criticize human rights abuses by the United States itself.

A number of prominent American publications, such as the *Wall Street Journal*, have joined in the attack, calling Amnesty International a "highly politicized pressure group" whose allegations regarding human rights abuses by U.S. forces "amount to pro-al Qaeda propaganda."

Amnesty International and Double Standards

This is not the first time the U.S. government has tried to discredit Amnesty International, however.

For example, in 1982, Amnesty International reported how the Guatemalan army under dictator Efraim Rios Montt was engaged the slaughter of thousands of Indian villagers in what Amnesty

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described as a “genocidal policy.” In response, the U.S. embassy in Guatemala City insisted that Amnesty International had been duped by Communists. In Washington, President Ronald Reagan insisted that Rios Montt, who had seized power in a military coup a few months earlier, was “totally dedicated to democracy” and that the general had been given “a bum rap.” U.S. government documents subsequently released reveal that the CIA and other U.S. agencies were actually confirming the reports of widespread massacres by the Guatemala armed forces.

During that same period, Amnesty International reported that in neighboring El Salvador, the junta’s armed forces and special security units were engaged in the torture, disappearance and murder of thousands of civilians, the majority of whom were nonviolent activists affiliated with peasant leagues, labor unions, religious organizations, human rights groups, and opposition political parties. However, Reagan administration officials denied such human rights abuses were taking place and Assistant Secretary of State Thomas Enders attacked Amnesty International for being one-sided and acting as apologists for “terrorists.” Subsequent investigations by the United Nations’ Truth Commission have confirmed the accuracy of Amnesty’s findings.

Also during the 1980s, the validity of Amnesty International’s reports regarding the widespread killings of Nicaraguan civilians by irregular forces based in Honduras and of Honduran civilians by security forces of their own government were repeatedly challenged by then-U.S. ambassador John Negroponte. Yet again, the U.S. government’s cover-ups were ultimately unsuccessful and Amnesty’s reports have since been acknowledged as accurate. Negroponte has since served as President Bush’s ambassador to the United Nations, followed by a stint as the “ambassador” to Iraq (while still under U.S. occupation), and currently as the first Director of National Intelligence.

Despite Amnesty International’s frank reporting of human rights abuses in Nicaragua, Cuba, and other leftist governments, media outlets supportive of U.S. Central America policy rushed to the Reagan administration’s defense, with the *Wall Street Journal* falsely

accusing Amnesty of applying “a gentler standard to U.S. adversaries in Central America than to U.S. friends” and using “ad hominem attacks” on “those offering conflicting evidence.”

A key figure in the Reagan administration’s efforts to discredit Amnesty International’s reporting on Central America was Elliot Abrams, who succeeded Enders as Assistant Secretary of State for Latin America. Despite being convicted of perjury in 1991 for lying to Congress under oath, President Bush during his first term appointed Abrams as the Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director on the National Security Council for Near East and North African Affairs. Abrams currently serves as his deputy national security adviser—ironically in charge of promoting democracy abroad.

Efforts to discredit Amnesty International when it challenged the human rights abuses of U.S. allies continued into the 1990s as well. In 1996, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and President Bill Clinton dismissed Amnesty International’s reports regarding the Israeli massacre of over 100 Lebanese refugees at a United Nations compound near Lebanese village of Qana, insisting—despite the failure to present any evidence to the contrary—that the killings were accidental.

In 1999, during a visit to Turkey not long after Amnesty International released a report documenting ongoing human rights abuses by the Turkish government, including the use of torture on an administrative basis, President Clinton praised what he described as a “renewed and clear determination of the Turkish government to take a stand against torture and to generally increase protection of human rights.” Despite the report noting structural impediments to any imminent lessening of ongoing abuses, the visiting American president declared “the human rights issue is moving in the right direction in this nation.”

Under the Bush administration, congressional Democrats have supported Republican efforts to discredit Amnesty International when it criticizes American allies. For example, in April of 2002, Amnesty International published a detailed and well-documented report regarding the Israeli military

offensive in the occupied West Bank, noting how “the IDF [Israeli Defense Forces] acted as though the main aim was to punish all Palestinians. Actions were taken by the IDF which had no clear or obvious military necessity.” The report went on to document unlawful killings, destruction of civilian property, arbitrary detention, torture, assaults on medical personnel and journalists, as well as random shooting at people in the streets and houses. In response, a bipartisan resolution was introduced in the House of Representatives challenged Amnesty’s findings, claiming that “Israel’s military operations are an effort to defend itself ... and are aimed only at dismantling the terrorist infrastructure in the Palestinian areas.” Though the chief sponsor was right-wing Republican leader Tom DeLay, the resolution was supported by such prominent congressional Democrats as Tom Lantos, Nancy Pelosi, Henry Waxman, Mark Udall, John Lewis, Lane Evans, Barney Frank, Edward Markey, Major Owens, David Price, Steny Hoyer, Dick Gephardt, Jim McGovern, and Patrick Kennedy, among others. Indeed, there were only 21 dissenting votes against the resolution in the 435-member body.

With the Democrats demonstrating their willingness to team up with Republicans to try to discredit Amnesty International when it criticizes human

rights abuses by the armed forces of key U.S. allies, it is not surprising that the Bush administration and its supporters now feel like they can get away with such brazen attacks against the Nobel Peace Prize-winning organization when it criticizes U.S. forces.

Yet the influence that Amnesty International has been able to wield over the years in advancing the cause of human rights has never come from the backing of governments or political parties, but from the support of concerned individuals from around the world. It is therefore up to the American people to challenge any and all elected officials who seek to discredit this noble organization in order to cover up human rights abuses by the United States and its allies.

Stephen Zunes, Middle East editor for Foreign Policy in Focus, is a professor of Politics at the University of San Francisco and the author of Tinderbox: U.S. Middle East Policy and the Roots of Terrorism (Common Courage Press, 2003).

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Editors: John Gershman, IRC

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