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Detainee Death Sheds Light on CIA Torture

More than seven years ago, a suspected Afghan militant was brought to a dimly lit CIA compound northeast of the airport in Kabul. The CIA called it the Salt Pit. Inmates knew it as the dark prison.

Inside a chilly cell, the man was shackled and left half-naked. He was found dead, exposed to the cold, in the early hours of Nov. 20, 2002.

The Salt Pit death was the only fatality known to have occurred inside the secret prison network the CIA operated abroad after the Sept. 11 attacks. The death had strong repercussions inside the CIA. It helped lead to a review that uncovered abuses in detention and interrogation procedures, and forced the agency to change those procedures.

Little has emerged about the Afghan's death, which the Justice Department is investigating. The Associated Press has learned the dead man's name, as well as new details about his capture in Pakistan and his Afghan imprisonment.

The man was Gul Rahman, a suspected militant captured on Oct. 29, 2002, a U.S. official familiar with the case confirmed. The official said Rahman was taken during an operation against Hezb-e-Islami Gulbuddin, an insurgent group headed by Afghan warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and allied with al Qaeda.

Rahman's identity also was confirmed by a former U.S. official familiar with the case, as well as by several other former and current officials. A reference to Rahman's death also turned up in a recently declassified government document.

The CIA's program of waterboarding and other harsh treatment of suspected terrorists has been debated since it ended in 2006. The Salt Pit case stands as a cautionary tale about the unfettered use of such practices. The Obama administration shut the CIA's prisons last year.

It remains uncertain whether any intelligence officers have been punished as a result of the Afghan's death, raising questions about the CIA's accountability in the case. The CIA's then-station chief in Afghanistan was promoted after Rahman's death, and the officer who ran the prison went on to other assignments, including one overseas, several former intelligence officials said.

The CIA declined to discuss the Salt Pit case and denied a Freedom of Information Act request submitted by the AP.

Rahman was taken into custody in Islamabad with four others. They included Dr. Ghairat Baheer, a physician who is Hekmatyar's son-in-law and a leader of Hezb-e-Islami, an insurgent faction blamed for numerous bombings and violence in Afghanistan.

Baheer, who said he spent six months in the Salt Pit during six years in Afghan prisons, said

in an interview in Islamabad that he never learned what happened to Rahman. Rahman's family repeatedly pressed International Red Cross officials about his fate, Baheer said.

"If he died there in interrogation or he died a natural death, they should have told his family and ended their uncertainty," Baheer said.

This account of the Salt Pit case was assembled from documents and interviews with both militants and officials in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and with more than two dozen current and former U.S. officials. The Americans spoke on condition of anonymity because the details of the case remain classified.

Rahman vanished before dawn on Oct. 29, 2002.

He had driven from Peshawar, Pakistan, the northwest frontier city known as a haven for insurgents. Leaving behind his wife and four daughters, Rahman had come to Islamabad for a medical checkup and was staying with Baheer, an old friend.

Rahman, in his early 30s, had worked as a driver for Baheer and in the mid-1990s as a guard for Hekmatyar, who is designated a global terrorist by the U.S.

About 1:30 a.m., U.S. agents and Pakistani security forces stormed Baheer's house and arrested him, two guards, a cook and Rahman.

After a week in custody, Rahman was separated from the others. "That was the last time I saw him," said Baheer, now a member of a Hezb-e-Islami delegation that met this month in Kabul, the Afghan capital, for peace talks with Afghan President Hamid Karzai.

Baheer said he was flown to Afghanistan and taken to the Salt Pit, the code name for an abandoned brick factory that became a forerunner of the network of secret CIA-run prisons operating from Poland to Thailand.

The Salt Pit contained a patchwork of small, windowless cells where detainees were subjected to harsh treatment and at least one mock execution, according to several former CIA officials.

"I was left naked, sleeping on the barren concrete," said Baheer. His toilet was a bucket. Loudspeakers blared. Guards concealed their identity with masks and carried torches.

Baheer said his American interrogators would tie him to a chair and sit on his stomach. They hung him naked, he said, for hours on end.

As a former Hekmatyar guard, Rahman had a militant's history. His nom de guerre was Abdul Manan. "Some time ago, he was with the jihad," Baheer acknowledged.

That description matches recollections of former and current U.S. officials who said the Afghan brought into the Salt Pit in late 2002 was violently unco-operative.

At one point, the detainee threw a latrine bucket at his guards. He also threatened to kill them. His stubborn responses provoked harsher treatment. His hands were shackled over his head, he was roughed up and doused with water, according to several former CIA officials.

The exact circumstances of Rahman's death are not clear, but the Afghan was left in the cold cell on the morning of Nov. 20, when the temperature dipped just below 36 degrees Fahrenheit (2 degrees Celsius). He was naked from the waist down, said two former U.S. officials familiar with the case. Within hours, he was dead.

CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia, sent a team "to gather the facts," the current U.S. official said. "The guidance was for the people on scene to preserve everything as it was."

A CIA medic at the site concluded the Afghan died of hypothermia. A doctor sent later confirmed that judgment. But the detainee's body was never returned to his family for burial.

A week later, Amnesty International issued a statement saying Baheer was being held without charge and possibly in CIA or FBI custody. No mention was made of Rahman.

Rahman's family, Baheer said, went to the Red Cross in Islamabad and Kabul. They are still uncertain of Rahman's fate, he said.

"The Americans have had enough time," said Baheer. "They should expose all those missing people who have died. After nearly eight years, enough is enough."

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At CIA headquarters, the agency's inspector general learned about the Salt Pit death and the existence of the agency's secret interrogation program. The inspector, John Helgerson, began an investigation into the death as well as a special review of the program.

The case appeared to prod the CIA to codify its interrogation program. The same month that the detainee died, the CIA's Counterterrorism Center started training courses for interrogators, according to public documents.

The following year, the CIA issued guidelines covering the use of cold in interrogations, with detailed instructions for the "safe temperature range when a detainee is wet or unclothed."

But harsh interrogation techniques continued for four more years.

When the inspector general's report on the Salt Pit death emerged, it focused on decisions made by two CIA officials: an inexperienced officer who had just taken his first overseas assignment to run the prison and the Kabul station chief, who managed CIA activities in Afghanistan. Their identities remain classified.

The report found that the Salt Pit officer displayed poor judgment in leaving the detainee in the cold. But it also indicated the officer made repeated requests to superiors for guidance that were largely ignored, according to two former U.S. intelligence officials.

That raised concerns about both the responsibility of the station chief and the CIA's management in Langley. Similar concerns about CIA management were later aired in the

inspector general's review of the CIA's secret interrogation program.

"The agency — especially in the early months of the program — failed to provide adequate staffing, guidance and support to those involved with the detention and interrogation of detainees," the report said.

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The inspector general referred the Salt Pit death to prosecutors in the Eastern District of Virginia. Two federal prosecutors, Paul J. McNulty and Chuck Rosenberg, conducted separate reviews. Each prosecutor concluded he couldn't make a case against any CIA officer involved in the death. Neither would discuss his decision.

The former U.S. official familiar with the case said federal prosecutors could not prove the CIA officer running the Salt Pit had intended to harm the detainee — a point made in a recently released government document that also disclosed Rahman's name.

The current U.S. official insisted that the case was adequately scrutinized. The official also said a CIA accountability review board was held in connection with the death.

The CIA declined to discuss whether the two agency officers cited in the inspector general's report were punished.

But when the case was put before Kyle D. Foggo, the CIA's third-ranking officer at the time, no formal administrative action was taken against the two men, said two former intelligence officials with knowledge of the case.

Foggo was later sent to prison on unrelated fraud charges. He did not respond to a letter sent to him in prison.

The unresolved questions about Rahman's death have led to new scrutiny by the Obama administration. A Justice Department criminal inquiry, led by prosecutor John Durham, is aimed at whether CIA operatives crossed the line in a small number of cases including the Salt Pit death.

But several former senior CIA officials questioned the Kabul station chief's career advancement inside the agency after Rahman died. Now a senior officer, the man was promoted at least three times since leaving Afghanistan in 2003, former officials said.

In contrast, the former officials said, the CIA's Baghdad station chief was demoted in rank after the death of an Iraqi at the Abu Ghraib military-run prison in November 2003.

"What you see across the board, there is no standard that is applied uniformly," said one former CIA officer, Charles Faddis, who recently published "Beyond Repair," a critical assessment of the agency.

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