

# Canada halts transfers of Afghan prisoners

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The Harper government quietly stopped transferring prisoners into Afghan custody months ago after compelling evidence of torture was discovered, the government admitted Wednesday on the eve of a federal court hearing.

The government kept the its decision under wraps, even as it prepared to fight rights groups seeking a halt to transfers and as it tried to drum up public support for extending Canada's commitment to wage war on the Taliban in southern Afghanistan.

Justice Department lawyers admitted Wednesday that detainee transfers were halted 10 weeks ago.

In early November, a prisoner told Canadian diplomats in an interrogation room in a secret police jail in Kandahar that he had been beaten and then told them where they could find the electrical cable and rubber hose used by his torturers. The Canadians found them beneath a chair.

“Canadian authorities were informed on November 5, 2007, by Canada's monitoring team, of a credible allegation of mistreatment pertaining to one Canadian-transferred detainee held in an Afghan detention facility,” the lawyers said in a letter sent Wednesday to Amnesty International Canada and the British Columbia Civil Liberties Association.

“As a consequence there have been no transfers of detainees to Afghan authorities since that date,” the letter confirmed.

The government only revealed it had ceased transfers Wednesday as it tried to make a deal with Amnesty and the BCCLA to drop their application for an injunction forbidding transfers. But the government refused a counter-offer in which they would have agreed to give seven days notice before resuming transfers.

The hearing on the injunction is expected to proceed this morning.

“Canada will resume transferring detainees when it believes it can do so in accordance with its international legal obligations,” Justice Department lawyers wrote in their letter.

Among those obligations is a Geneva Conventions ban against handing prisoners over to those who would abuse or torture them.

It's not clear whether Canadian troops are still taking prisoners only to release them or whether – despite the claims of senior generals – they are being held for months in the temporary cells run by Canadian Military Police on Kandahar Air Base or whether prisoners are being turned over to U.S. forces, which do operate a big prison at Bagram in Afghanistan.

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