

Abuse from sea to shining sea

By Van Jones

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The images we've seen from Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison are truly horrifying. Now reports are surfacing of similar, videotaped abuses by U.S. soldiers at Guantanamo Bay. But as awful as all of this is, these scandals should come as no surprise. Just look at the horrible way we treat prisoners here at home.

People across the country are rightfully outraged by the abuses in U.S. prisons in Iraq. According to a recent ABC/Washington Post poll, 69 percent of Americans think this kind of abuse is unacceptable in any situation. But where is the outrage for the abuse of prisoners right here at home?

A recent New York Times article details physical and sexual abuse of prisoners in facilities throughout the U.S. – abuse that continues with little public knowledge or concern.

Like prisoners of war in Iraq, domestic inmates are routinely humiliated and degraded. In Pennsylvania and other states, staff routinely strip inmates in front of other inmates before their transfer to a different unit or prison. At the Maricopa County jail in Phoenix, Arizona, jailers force male inmates to wear women's pink underwear as a form of humiliation.

New inmates at Virginia's Wallens Ridge maximum security prison report being forced to wear black hoods, allegedly to keep them from spitting on guards. Former inmates have said that guards often beat and cursed at them and forced them to crawl.

Texas has been home to some of the worst abuses. For much of George W. Bush's tenure as governor, Texas prisons were under a federal consent decree due to crowding and violence by guards against inmates. What prompted the consent decree? A federal court found that guards were allowing inmate gang leaders to buy and sell other inmates as sex slaves.

Do you think we are immune from these abuses in "liberal" California? Think again. In fact, the most recent prison scandals here involve our smallest prisoners: children.

Recent official state government reports, including first-hand accounts, describe the California Youth Authority (CYA) as a violent hotbed of human rights abuses. According to these reports, guards regularly instigate fights among the youth. They also commonly spray

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wards with chemical weapons and high-pressure hoses.

The facilities are filthy; some have blood and feces smeared on walls. Wards' emergency medical and mental health needs are neglected. Staff and administrators needlessly lock minors in solitary confinement for 23 hours a day – for months on end. And some youth are placed in tiny, one-person cages or forced to spend hours on their knees with their hands bound behind their backs.

Recently, state authorities released a security video of prison employees viciously beating two young wards at a CYA facility. In the video, one guard punches a boy in the face 28 separate times as the boy lies helpless on the floor, offering no resistance. Then other guards come and spray the boys with chemical weapons.

This video shocked Californians of every stripe. But what's more shocking is that Bill Lockyer – a Democrat and the state Attorney General – has decided NOT to prosecute the guards caught savagely beating two helpless wards.

Even President Bush, who presided over some of the country's most atrocious prisons, is responding to public pressure by promising that the abusers in Iraq be prosecuted. But Lockyer, one of the highest Democratic officials, is turning a blind eye to documented brutality here in California. And Democrats have the nerve to scold Bush?

With this sorry human rights record at home, it would have been more surprising if human rights abuses hadn't happened in overseas military prisons. Indeed, with the United States' track record on prisons, you could have predicted these abuses before they even happened.

All of us – especially our elected leaders – need to address this most glaring human rights disgrace at home. At least one of the soldiers charged in Iraq – Corporal Charles Graner, Jr. – was a prison guard in Pennsylvania. The righteous and justified outrage at the images we have seen from Abu Ghraib must be directed not only at that facility, but also at the root of these failures – prisons here at home.

Attorney Van Jones' organization, Books Not Bars, works to replace the California youth prison system with regional rehabilitation centers.