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Fresh attack on professional credentials of psychologists implicated in torture

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July 15, 2010

A human rights group and two law school clinics are going after the licenses of psychologists involved in the interrogations and torture of detainees by the U.S. military and intelligence personnel.

During the past month, the public interest law groups have filed complaints with state psychology boards against three psychologists who participated in interrogations, either as military personnel or CIA contractors. The complaints call upon the individual state boards to investigate the conduct of the psychologists and revoke their licenses if they violated standards of professional conduct.

The lawyers involved said the groups did not coordinate their complaints, but have been pursuing their efforts independently.

This is not the first time since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorism attacks that complaints have been filed against psychologists involved in military and CIA interrogations, but recent documents including a 2008 report by the Senate Armed Services Committee have provided further evidence of misconduct, the lawyers said.

"It became clear that there was enough evidence in newly available public records to make a stronger case," said Kathy Roberts, a staff attorney with the Center for Justice and Accountability, a human rights organization based in San Francisco.

The recent activity began on June 16, when a professor with the Roderick MacArthur Justice Center at Northwestern University School of Law filed a complaint with the Texas State Board of Examiners of Psychologists on behalf of a Texas psychologist, asking the board to investigate James Mitchell. Mitchell, a retired Air Force psychologist, participated in the torture of Pakistani detainee Abu Zubaydah in a secret prison in Thailand in 2002, according to the complaint. He was a contractor with the CIA at the time.

"I think the question raised by the complaint, and by the copious public record upon which it is based, is whether the psychological profession cares when a member of its ranks designs and implements a regime calculated to brutalize another human being," said Joseph Margulies, a Northwestern law professor. "If the answer is yes, that psychologist should be sanctioned."

Two additional complaints followed on July 7.

The Center for Justice and Accountability filed a complaint with the New York Office of Professions on behalf of a New York psychologist against John Francis Leso. The Army psychologist led the Behavioral Science Consultation Team at the U.S. Naval Station in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, for seven months in 2002. That team of mental health professionals advised and participated in detainee interrogations.

"He recommended a series of increasingly psychologically and physically abusive interrogation techniques to be applied against detainees held by the United States," the complaint reads.

Attorneys with Harvard Law School's International Human Rights Clinic filed a complaint with the Ohio Psychology Board on behalf of an Ohio psychologist against Leso's successor at Guantánamo Bay, Larry C. James. James ran the team of mental health professionals in 2003 and from 2007 to 2008. The complaint alleges that prisoners were threatened with rape and death, were religiously humiliated, deprived of sleep and physically assaulted during James' tenure. James is now the dean of the psychology school at Wright State University near Dayton, Ohio.

"We have faith the board will recognize its responsibility and fully investigate the claims in the complaint," said Deborah Popowski, a fellow at Harvard's Human Rights Clinic.

Similar complaints filed with state psychology boards have been dismissed in the past. A Louisiana psychologist filed a complaint in 2008 against James, who is licensed in both Louisiana and Ohio. The Louisiana State Board of Examiners of Psychologists rejected the request to investigate James.

Earlier this month, the American Psychological Association (APA) sent a letter to the Texas licensing board confirming that the allegations included in the complaint against Mitchell violate the organization's ethical guidelines.

Roberts said she hopes the recent complaints will prompt the APA to come out with rules that prohibit psychologists from participating in interrogations.

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