

Kremlin has state policy of torture in Ukraine, says UN expert

Maxim Tucker, Kyiv

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The Kremlin is implementing a carefully choreographed “state policy” of torture in occupied Ukraine, the leading United Nations expert on the abuse has said. “It’s not just that it’s so widespread,” Dr Alice Jill Edwards, the UN special rapporteur on torture, said in Kyiv as she concluded a seven-day visit. “You can see from the way the method is set up and mirrored across different regions — there is the supervising officer, the torturer and the interrogator. “The methods of doing it, the purposes for doing it and the targets are consistent. To me, that is a state policy.”

Edwards said she had spoken to about a dozen victims and reviewed scores of testimonies gathered by civil society organisations and Ukrainian law enforcement. The Ukrainian prosecutor-general’s office told her that 90 per cent of Ukrainians held in Russian captivity had reported being tortured.

Their stories had revealed a pattern to the Russian treatment of prisoners — both military and civilian — that demonstrated it was orchestrated from above, she said. Asked whether President Putin could be held responsible, Edwards said: “With torture, the buck stops at the top. [Preventing it] is a state obligation. It’s also an individual obligation on every individual soldier.”

On June 12, she sent a diplomatic letter to Sergey Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister, detailing 50 “forensic” accounts that should have triggered an investigation under the Kremlin’s obligations to the UN. She received no response. “It’s hard to wrap our heads around that such a level of brutality could be organised — it’s a struggle for everyday people to understand, but this is well beyond acceptance, it’s endorsement.”

Victims had described torture being carried out in stages. It would start without questions, “to oppress, to intimidate, to humiliate and subjugate the Ukrainian detainees”, Edwards said.

Russian soldiers set dogs upon one group of prisoners. A detainee released afterwards told Edwards: “The Russians loved it, they laughed, they were taking videos on their phones. The dog mauled my legs, I fell and lost consciousness.”

Several described having to “run the gauntlet” between ranks of Russian soldiers beating them with batons, and one woman told Edwards after interrogation she had been told to make her way back to her cell blindfolded, down several corridors and flights of stairs. If she touched the wall the Russians would beat her, she said, they would shove her and if she fell they would laugh at her.

Former detainees told Edwards that the Russians would feed them only one bowl of soup a day, keep 15 prisoners in unhygienic conditions in a room designed to hold four and force them to share one bar of soap while they were washing themselves.

One captured Ukrainian soldier said he had been hung by his feet upside down and beaten, then forced to watch a comrade hung by his arms being beaten. The Russians broke his nose and teeth and then forced him to wash up the other’s blood. “This was done without any questions, almost as though there were a process of humiliation first and the questions would come later,” said Edwards. Many victims reported sexual violence during this process, she added. “A large number of men recounted different forms of sexual abuse, in particular the attachment of electrodes to genitals and that kind of mocking humiliation. Threats of sexual violence or threats of rape were quite common.”

She said women had been less willing to come forward to report rape, but a humanitarian organisation entering freshly liberated regions had reported a huge demand for emergency contraception, giving out 5,000 doses. “That was just a shocking kind of statistic. You know, it really spoke to me of the consequences of all of this,” said Edwards.

One Ukrainian public official told Edwards she was held in a cell with two collaborators who tried to extract information from her by trying to bond with her. Eventually they confided that the Russians received a bonus equivalent to 10 per cent of their monthly salary for capturing a Ukrainian partisan, 25 per cent for extracting a confession, and 50 per cent if they turned that person into a collaborator.

She was taken by the Russians along with her son, beaten and then forced to stand outside the room where her son was being held and watch him being tortured. There were also efforts to “recruit people for intelligence gathering, by video recording their torture, confessions or votes, then threatening to release the videos to show them collaborating”, said Edwards, who will present her final report to the UN Human Rights Council in March next year.

Most of the prisoners she interviewed had been exchanged in prisoner swaps, afterwards telling her of a systematic effort to erase the evidence of their torture. “In my view there is a ‘systemisation’ of the effort to cover up the torture they have perpetrated in advance of prisoner swaps,” she said. “I had interviewees indicate that prior to their transfer under a prisoner of war exchange, they were taken to a particular detention facility where they were well fed, where they were clothed, where they were bathed . . . for two full weeks with the hope that any bruising and so forth would pass.”

The Russians had warned several detainees not to report their torture when they returned home or their comrades still in captivity would be tortured in retaliation, she said.

The Kremlin’s efforts to cover up their crimes often fall flat, however. In one instance, Kyiv exchanged Russian prisoners of war for 12 Ukrainian soldiers captured alive. The Ukrainian soldiers were returned as corpses.

Maxim Tucker was Kyiv correspondent for The Times between 2014 and 2017 and is now an editor on the foreign desk. He has returned to report from the frontlines of the war in Ukraine since Russia's full-scale invasion in February. He advises on grantmaking in the former Soviet countries for the Open Society Foundations and prior to that was Amnesty International's Campaigner on Ukraine and the South Caucasus. He has also written for The Telegraph, The Guardian, The Independent, Newsweek and Politico.

How Scottish fishing nets could play a part in defending Ukraine ***Farmers have been digging deep to help a bombed city after a rallying cry from an Angus businessman. Now he has turned to trawlermen***

Magnus Linklater

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Mark Laird is on a mission. He intends to go round the harbour towns of Scotland asking trawlermen to donate fishing nets to Ukraine. It sounds odd, he admits, but they are needed to protect electric generators from Russian drone attacks.

Laird, 51, a farmer and businessman from Angus, was in the Ukrainian city of Lviv last week, delivering 35 four-wheel drive trucks donated by Scottish farmers. They will be used to carry wounded soldiers from the front to field hospitals and ambulances. Some may be adapted to transport the weapons needed to shoot down drones. “Our farmers have been incredibly generous,” Laird said. “They have now donated a total of 210 trucks to help Ukraine. We contacted them through social media and the response has been magnificent. Strangely enough it was the small farmers, the ones with just a few acres, who were the most generous.”

It was the governor of Lviv who suggested trawler nets. Welcoming 65 of the farmers, who had driven their vehicles across Europe, at a dinner in the city, he said the real threat this winter would be Russia’s efforts to smash Ukrainian energy infrastructure, and in particular its transformers and generators. The nets could camouflage them and protect them from drone attacks.

Laird has had a long association with Ukraine. Starting out in 1994 with farmland in Poland, he went on to acquire 200,000 acres in Ukraine, where he grew potatoes. By 2011 his company was listed on the London stock exchange, and in 2013 it was bought by Saudi Arabians. The money allowed him to build a factory in Lviv, producing potato starch — a commodity used all over the world to make biodegradable wrapping and to manufacture MDF wood. The factory now employs more than 100 people.

When the Russians invaded in February last year, he sent body armour, medical supplies and night vision equipment for his staff, who manned roadblocks around the city, expecting an attack at any moment. “We couldn’t just sit back and do nothing,” he said. “When the immediate threat of attack did not materialise, we started finding out what the Ukrainians really needed, and one of the first things they wanted was four-wheel drive trucks. “Every farmer has a decent vehicle, so we reached out to them through social media, and soon we were getting donations of pick-up trucks, Toyotas, Mitsubishis, Land Rovers, that kind of thing. It simply

The vehicles come in from Scotland and England, driving into Ukraine escorted by police.

Laird has been informed by contacts in Ukraine that the big fear this winter is of a sustained assault on infrastructure in an effort to demoralise the population. Drones and missiles are likely to be used to knock out electric sub-stations, so huge efforts are being made to find ways to protect them. Trawler nets may be only one of them, but if anybody can collect enough to make a difference it is likely to be Laird and his team. “I’m going to reach out to the fishing communities in Scotland as soon as I get back,” he said.

Russian commanders injured in missile strike on navy HQ, says Ukraine

Tom Parfitt

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At least two Russian commanders were wounded in a Ukrainian missile strike on the headquarters of Russia's Black Sea Fleet in Crimea, Kyiv has claimed. One of the casualties was said to be Alexander Romanchuk, a Russian general commanding forces along the key southeastern front line in Ukraine. The attack on Friday was reported to have been carried out using British-supplied Storm Shadow cruise missiles, although that has not been confirmed by Kyiv. A video appears to show one missile slamming into the building after it has already been hit.

Kyrylo Budanov, Ukraine's military intelligence chief, told Voice of America that at least nine people had been killed and 16 injured in the strike. Romanchuk was "in a very serious condition", he claimed, adding that another senior Russian officer, Lieutenant General Oleg Tsekov, who serves with the Northern Fleet, was "unconscious". Budanov said the casualty figures he had cited did not include security guards and other military personnel who were not permanent employees at the fleet headquarters but were there at the time.

The claims have not been independently verified and Russia has said that only one serviceman was killed.

Ukraine, which does not always claim responsibility for strikes on Russian-controlled territory, did so on this occasion. There has been speculation that the strike was timed to coincide with a meeting of senior Russian staff at the headquarters, based on information acquired by Ukrainian intelligence.

However, some analysts have suggested it would have been unlikely for top brass to hold such a meeting at the prominent, colonnaded building after a series of accurate Ukrainian strikes on targets in Crimea in recent weeks. In his Voice of America interview, Budanov also responded to a CNN report that Ukraine's security services probably took part in drone strikes against militia in Sudan supported by Wagner, the Kremlin-backed mercenary group. Budanov declined to comment directly but said: "A year ago, I personally openly said that all Russian war criminals who fought, are fighting, or plan to fight against Ukraine will be punished anywhere in the world."

The successful Ukrainian attack on the Black Sea Fleet HQ, eluding Russian defence batteries, was a fillip to Ukraine as it received news of missile supplies from Washington. It had long been pleading for ATACMS missiles (or "attack 'ems"), which would allow it to hit deep into Russian-occupied territory, targeting supply lines, ammunition stores, and control and command locations.

President Biden informed President Zelensky of Ukraine about the forthcoming delivery of the missiles during the latter's visit to Washington last week, NBC News reported, citing three US officials and a congressional official. When the missiles would be sent was unclear and a public announcement about the supply is yet to be made.

The Washington Post, citing sources familiar with the plans, said Ukraine was likely to receive a version of ATACMS armed with cluster bomblets rather than a single warhead, the former being more plentiful in US stockpiles.

Tom Parfitt is a correspondent based in Moscow who writes for the British newspaper, The Guardian, and other international publications. Tom has lived and worked as a journalist in Russia since finishing an MA in politics and security at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University College London, in 2002. He has travelled regularly to Chechnya, Ingushetia and other parts of the North Caucasus to report on armed conflict, terrorism and human rights abuses committed by Russian security forces.