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Britain Admits to 90 Secret Prisoners in Afghanistan

By Jason Ditz

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Defense Secretary Philip Hammond has admitted that the British government is holding scores of “suspects” in military custody in the Helmand Province of Afghanistan, with the detainees being held without charges, without access to a lawyer, and indeed with access to any legal system.

Hammond downplayed the revelation, and dismissed claims from human rights lawyer Phil Shiner that the prison amounted to a “secret facility,” even though its existence as a detention center wasn’t public knowledge. He claimed the detainees could be transferred to the Afghan government in a “matter of days,” though at least one of the 90 has reportedly been held for over a full year.

The decision to start detaining suspects came after repeated reports of widespread torture in the Afghan prison system. Hammond complained that it was disingenuous for Shiner to complain about the open-ended detentions without charges when it was Shiner’s own firm that pointed out that transferring captives to the custody of a nation practising torture was in violation of the UN Convention on Human Rights.

NATO’s own rules of engagement say they can only hold detainees without charges for 96 hours, however, and the British military appears to have just openly flouted this, insisting that if they couldn’t send them to disappear into an Afghan torture dungeon they’d just have to keep them more or less permanently on a British military base. Hammond insisted some of the

unnamed captives posed a threat to British occupation forces in Afghanistan, meaning if the Afghan torture situation is never addressed, as seems likely, they are apparently prepared to just keep holding them without charges.