# The Salt Pit

# CIA Interrogation Facility outside Kabul

On March 3, 2005, an article by Dana Priest titled "CIA Avoids Scrutiny of Detainee Treatment" and published in *The Washington Post* exposed the existence of a "black-site" or secretly-run CIA interrogation facility in Afghanistan code-named the "Salt Pit." Located to the north of Kabul's [business](http://www.globalsecurity.org/intell/world/afghanistan/saltpit.htm##) district, the Salt Pit was reported to be an abandoned brick factory built on a 10-acre site, consisting of a three-story building, as well as several smaller buildings.

The facility was established as an interrogation center following the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001. In addition to serving as a detention facility, the site was reportedly also used to train Afghan counterterrorism forces. Eventually the site was expanded to serve as a CIA's substation which was accessible only to CIA agents and a small number of Afghan guards. Before the Salt Pit became operational it is believed that CIA interrogations took place in a number of heavily secured metal [shipping](http://www.globalsecurity.org/intell/world/afghanistan/saltpit.htm##) containers at Bagram air base.

Although designated as an Aghan "host-nation facility", manned by Afghan guards, the site was, according to the report, financed entirely using CIA funds, covering salaries, maintenance and electricity, among others. This was meant to provide some level of protection for CIA officers for actions being perpetrated within the confines of the site. The CIA also reportedly determined who would be detained at the facility. The prison was, at the time, the largest CIA prison in Afghanistan.

As of the time of the March 2005 *Washington Post* article, the brick factory had already been torn down. This followed the November 2002 death of an Afghan detainee at the "Salt Pit" who froze to death overnight after having been stripped naked, was buried and kept "off-the-books". The CIA case officer in charge of the facility has since reportedly been promoted, though an investigation by the CIA Inspector General had been opened. As of mid-March 2005, the US Justice Department was reportedly considering pressing charges in that case. As of early November 2005, the CIA officer had not been charged.

Another article published in November 2, 2005, by *The Washington Post* provided additional details about the facility. Although manned by Afghan guards and surveillance cameras, the facility was later relocated to Bagram Air Base for [security](http://www.globalsecurity.org/intell/world/afghanistan/saltpit.htm##) reasons as the road leading to the site was not considered safe to travel. The facility at Bagram Air Base was itself reportedly closed and operations conducted there relocated elsewhere.

The "Salt Pit" was only one part of a worldwide [network](http://www.globalsecurity.org/intell/world/afghanistan/saltpit.htm##) of covert detention centers established since the 9/11 terrorist attacks and operated by the CIA. Other sites reportedly included one in Thailand (shut down after its existence was revealed in 2003) and a small site located at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba (reportedly closed in 2004) and a Soviet-era compound located in Eastern Europe. The *Washington Post* article reported that CIA interrogators operating in those sites had been given permission to use "Enhanced Interrogation Techniques" despite the prohibition of some of these techniques, such as 'waterboarding' by the U.N. Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, to which the United States and 'black sites' host-countries are parties to.

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**CIA Avoids Scrutiny of Detainee Treatment**

Afghan's Death Took Two Years to Come to Light; Agency Says Abuse Claims Are Probed Fully

*By Dana Priest*

Washington Post Staff Writer  
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In November 2002, a newly minted CIA case officer in charge of a secret prison just north of Kabul allegedly ordered guards to strip naked an uncooperative young Afghan detainee, chain him to the concrete floor and leave him there overnight without blankets, according to four U.S. government officials aware of the case.

The Afghan guards -- paid by the CIA and working under CIA supervision in an abandoned warehouse code-named the Salt Pit -- dragged their captive around on the concrete floor, bruising and scraping his skin, before putting him in his cell, two of the officials said.

As night fell, so, predictably, did the temperature.

By morning, the Afghan man had frozen to death.

After a quick autopsy by a CIA medic -- "hypothermia" was listed as the cause of death -- the guards buried the Afghan, who was in his twenties, in an unmarked, unacknowledged cemetery used by Afghan forces, officials said. The captive's family has never been notified; his remains have never been returned for burial. He is on no one's registry of captives, not even as a "ghost detainee," the term for CIA captives held in military prisons but not registered on the books, they said.

"He just disappeared from the face of the earth," said one U.S. government official with knowledge of the case.

The CIA case officer, meanwhile, has been promoted, two of the officials said, who like others interviewed for this article spoke on the condition of anonymity because they are not authorized to talk about the matter. The case is under investigation by the CIA inspector general.

The fact that the Salt Pit case has remained secret for more than two years reflects how little is known about the CIA's treatment of detainees and its handling of allegations of abuse. The public airing of abuse at Abu Ghraib prompted the Pentagon to undertake and release scathing reports about conduct by military personnel, to revise rules for handling prisoners, and to prosecute soldiers accused of wrongdoing. There has been no comparable public scrutiny of the CIA, whose operations and briefings to Congress are kept classified by the administration.

Thirty-three military workers have been court-martialed and an additional 55 received reprimands for their mishandling of detainees, according to the Defense Department. One CIA contractor has been charged with a crime related to allegations of detainee abuse. David A. Passaro is on trial in federal court in North Carolina, facing four assault charges in connection with the death of Abdul Wali, a prisoner who died while at a U.S. military firebase in Afghanistan in June 2003.

The CIA's inspector general is investigating at least half a dozen allegations of serious abuse in Iraq and Afghanistan, including two previously reported deaths in Iraq, one in Afghanistan and the death at the Salt Pit, U.S. officials said.

A CIA spokesman said yesterday that the agency actively pursues allegations of misconduct. Other U.S. officials said CIA cases can take longer to resolve because, unlike the military, the agency must rely on the Justice Department to conduct its own review and to prosecute when warranted.

"The agency has an aggressive, robust office of the inspector general with the authority to look into any CIA program or operation anywhere," said a CIA representative who spoke on the condition of anonymity. "The inspector general has done so and will continue to do so. We investigate allegations of abuse fully." The spokesman declined to comment on any case.

The Salt Pit was the top-secret name for an abandoned brick factory, a warehouse just north of the Kabul business district that the CIA began using shortly after the United States invaded Afghanistan in October 2001. The 10-acre facility included a three-story building, eventually used by the U.S. military to train the Afghan counterterrorism force, and several smaller buildings, which were off-limits to all but the CIA and a handful of Afghan guards and cooks who ran the prison, said several current and former military and intelligence officers.

The CIA wanted the Salt Pit to be a "host-nation facility," an Afghan prison with Afghan guards. Its designation as an Afghan facility was intended to give U.S. personnel some insulation from actions taken by Afghan guards inside, a tactic used in secret CIA prisons in other countries, former and current CIA officials said.