Belhaj and his then-pregnant wife were detained by Malaysia with the help of British intelligence and then handed over to the CIA in Thailand,

CAIRO (AP) -- Human Rights Watch said it has uncovered evidence of a wider use of waterboarding in American interrogations of detainees than has been acknowledged by the United States, in a report Thursday that details further brutal treatment at secret CIA-run prisons under the Bush administration-era U.S. program of detention and rendition of terror suspects.

The report also paints a more complete picture of Washington's close cooperation with the regime of Libya's former dictator Moammar Gadhafi in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. The U.S. handed over to Libya the Islamist opponents of Gadhafi that it detained abroad with only thin "diplomatic assurances" that they would not be mistreated, and several of them were subsequently tortured in prison, Human Rights Watch said.

The 154-page report features interviews by the New York-based group with 14 Libyan dissident exiles. They describe systematic abuses while they were held in U.S.-led detention centers in Afghanistan - some as long as two years - or in U.S.-led interrogations in Pakistan, Morocco, Thailand, Sudan and elsewhere before the Americans handed them over to Libya.

"Not only did the U.S. deliver (Gadhafi) his enemies on a silver platter, but it seems the CIA tortured many of them first, said Laura Pitter, counterterrorism adviser at Human Rights Watch and author of the report.

"The scope of the Bush administration abuse appears far broader than previously acknowledged," she said.

The report comes days after the Justice Department announced it would not bring criminal charges against any CIA personnel over severe interrogation methods used in the detention and rendition program. Investigators said they could not prove any interrogators went beyond guidelines authorized by the Bush administration. Rights activists and some Obama administration officials say even the authorized techniques constituted torture, though the CIA and Bush administration argue they do not.

Any new instances of waterboarding, however, would go beyond the three that the CIA has said were authorized.

Former President George W. Bush, his Vice President Dick Cheney and the CIA have said that the method was used on only three senior al-Qaida suspects at secret CIA black sites in Thailand and Poland - Khaled Sheikh Mohammed, Aby Zubayda and Abd al-Rahman al-Nashiri, all currently being held at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. The technique involves pouring water on a hooded detainee's nose and mouth until he feels he is drowning.

The 14 Libyans interviewed by Human Rights Watch were swept up in the American hunt for Islamic militants and al-Qaida figures around the world after the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks. They were mostly members of the anti-Gadhafi Libyan Islamic Fighting Group who fled in the 1980s and 1990s to Pakistan, Afghanistan and African countries. The group ran training camps in Afghanistan at the same time al-Qaida was based there but it largely shunned Osama bin Laden and his campaign against the United States, focusing instead on fighting Gadhafi.

Ironically, the U.S. turned around and helped the Libyan opposition overthrow Gadhafi in 2011. Now several of the 14 former detainees hold positions in the new Libyan government.

The accounts of new uses of simulated drowning came from two former detainees, Mohammed al-Shoroeiya and Khaled al-Sharif, who also described a gamut of abuses they went through. The two were seized in Pakistan in April 2003 and taken to U.S.-run prisons in Afghanistan, where al-Shoroeiya was held for 16 months and al-Sharif for two years before they were handed over to Libya.

In Afghanistan, they were shackled in cells for months in variety of positions, often naked in almost total darkness with music blaring continuously, left to defecate and urinate on themselves. For example, al-Sharif spent three weeks seated on the ground in his cell with his ankles and wrists chained to a ring in the wall, forcing him to keep his arms and legs elevated. He said he was taken out of his shackles once a day for a half-hour to eat.

For the first three months, they were not allowed to bathe. "We looked like monsters," al-Shoroeiya said.

Al-Shoroeiya described being locked naked for a day and a half in a tall, narrow, half-meter-wide (1 1/2-foot-wide) chamber with his hands chained above his head, with no food as Western music blasted loudly from speakers next to his ears the entire time.

At another point, he was stuffed into a 1 meter by 1 meter (3 foot by 3 foot) box resembling a footlocker and kept there for more than an hour as interrogators prodded him with long, thin objects through holes in the side of the box.

Both he and Sharif said they were repeatedly taken to a room where they were slammed against a wooden wall and punched in the abdomen.

Al-Shoroeiya said one female American interrogator told him, "Now you are under the custody of the United States of America. In this place there will be no human rights. Since September 11, we have forgotten about something called human rights," according to the report.

Al-Shoroeiya described being waterboarded, though he did not use the term. He said he was put in a hood and strapped upside down on a wooden board. Freezing water was poured over

his nose and mouth until he felt he was suffocating. During several half-hour interrogation sessions, they would waterboard him multiple times, asking him questions in between while a doctor monitored his body temperature.

"They wouldn't stop until they got some sort of answer from me," he told HRW.

Al-Sharif described a similar technique. Instead of being strapped to a board, he was put on a plastic sheet with guards holding up the edges, while freezing water was poured over him, including onto his hooded face directly over his mouth and nose.

"I felt as if I were suffocating," he told HRW. "I spent three months getting interrogated heavily ... and they gave me a different kind of torture every day. Sometimes they used water, sometimes not."

Asked about the new accounts, CIA spokeswoman Jennifer Youngblood said the agency "has been on the record that there are three substantiated cases" of the use of waterboarding.

She said she could not comment on the specific allegations but noted the Justice Department's decision not to prosecute after it "exhaustively reviewed the treatment of more than 100 detainees in the post-9/11 period - including allegations involving unauthorized interrogation techniques."

The Obama administration has ordered a halt to waterboarding and many of the severe techniques authorized by its predecessors.

Others of the 14 former detainees in the Human Rights Watch described similar conditions as al-Shoroeiya and al-Sharif, particularly three held in the same U.S.-led prisons in Afghanistan.

One of them, Majid Mokhtar Sasy al-Maghrebi, said he nearly went insane in isolation after months being shackled naked in dark, freezing cells with music blaring, pounding his head

against the wall and screaming, "I want to die, why don't you just kill me?"

Another, detained in Mauretania, said that during interrogations by a foreigner he believed was American, his wife was brought to the detention center; his captors showed him his wife through a peephole and threatened to rape her if he did not cooperate.

Human Rights Watch said the U.S. failed in its post-9/11 campaign to distinguish between Islamists targeting the United States and those who "may simply have been engaged in armed opposition against their own repressive regimes.

"This failure risked aligning the United States with brutal dictators," the report said.

Eight of those interviewed were handed over to Libya in 2004 - the same year then-British Prime Minister Tony Blair made a public rapprochement with Gadhafi and Anglo-Dutch oil giant Shell signed a major exploration deal off the Libyan coast, the HRW report noted. The remaining six were transferred to Libya over the two following years.

All were jailed by Gadhafi's regime, most of them freed only after his fall. Most said they were not physically tortured - perhaps a result of Gadhafi's attempts to mend fences with the West - but were kept in solitary confinement for long periods. Several, however, told HRW they were beaten and tortured, including being given electrical shocks.

The report also calls into question Libyan claims that one figure handed over by the Americans, Ibn el-Sheikh al-Libi, committed suicide in a Libyan prison. Al-Libi was held in U.S. secret prisons for years after 2001 and gave information under torture by the Egyptians that the Bush administration used to justify the 2003 invasion of Iraq but was later discredited. After his handover, Libyan authorities said he hanged himself in his cell. But HRW researchers said they were shown photos of his body that showed signs of torture.

Messages to Libya from the CIA and British intelligence among the Tripoli Documents published by HRW indicated the United States and Britain were eager to help Libya obtain several senior LIFG figures, including its co-founders, Abdel-Hakim Belhaj and Sami al-Saadi.

Belhaj and his then-pregnant wife were detained by Malaysia with the help of British intelligence and then handed over to the CIA in Thailand, where he told HRW he was stripped and beaten. They were then taken to Libya, where Belhaj was imprisoned.

After Belhaj arrived in Libya, a message believed to be from the then-head of counterterrorism at British intelligence congratulates the Libyan intelligence chief. Britain's help "was the least we could do for you and for Libya to demonstrate the remarkable relationship we have built," he wrote.