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Poll Shows Divide on Question of Torture

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WASHINGTON - Most people in eight countries that are American allies don't want the United States conducting secret interrogations of terror suspects on their soil, an AP-Ipsos poll found.

Anxiety about recent reports of secret prisons run by the CIA in eastern Europe has been heightened by the ongoing debate on the use of torture. The poll found Americans and residents of many of the allied countries divided on the question of torture, with about as many saying it's OK in some cases as those saying it never should be used.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who is traveling in Europe this week, said Monday the United States is following all laws and treaties on the treatment of terrorism suspects and has shared intelligence with its allies that has "helped protect European countries from attack, saving European lives."

Like other U.S. officials, Rice has refused to answer the underlying question of whether the CIA operated secret, Soviet-era prisons in Eastern Europe and whether CIA flights carried al-Qaida prisoners through European airports. She said the U.S. "will use every lawful weapon to defeat these terrorists."

About two-thirds of the people living in Canada, Mexico, South Korea and Spain said they would oppose allowing the U.S. to secretly interrogate terror suspects in their countries. Almost that many in Britain, France, Germany and Italy said they feel the same way. Almost two-thirds in the United States support such interrogations in the U.S. by their own government.

Officials with the European Union and in at least a half-dozen European countries are investigating the reports of secret U.S. interrogations in eastern Europe. The EU has threatened to revoke voting rights of any nation in the European Union that was host to a clandestine detention center.

After the report of secret prisons overseas, President Bush said, "We do not torture."

U.S. military forces have held hundreds of suspects at known installations outside the United States, including at the U.S. naval base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. The U.S. has adopted aggressive interrogation techniques since the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks - techniques some fear occasionally cross the line into torture.

"I thought we were the good guys," said Alan Schwartz, a political independent who lives near Buffalo, N.Y. "I thought we were the ones with the high standards."

Almost four in 10, 38 percent, in the United States said they thought torture could be justified at least sometimes.

About one-fourth said it could be justified rarely, and 36 percent said it could never be justified.

About four in 10 in Mexico and France said torture is never justified. About half in Britain, Spain, Germany and Canada felt torture could never be justified, while only one in 10 in South Korea said torture is never OK, according to the polls of about 1,000 adults in each of the nine countries.

They were conducted between Nov. 15 and Nov. 28. Each poll had a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 3 percentage points.

The strongest opposition to torture came in Italy, where six in 10 said it is never justified.

"It doesn't matter if these people are dangerous, they still have a dignity and the right not to be tortured for whatever reason," said Maurizio Longo, an Italian real estate agent.

The Bush administration has taken the position that some terrorism suspects are "enemy combatants" not protected by the Geneva Conventions, which are international treaties that, among other things, spell out the rights of prisoners of war. In 2002, a group of Justice Department lawyers prepared internal memos that gave the government more freedom in the aggressive interrogation of terrorist suspects.

"The Bush administration policy is against torture of any kind; it's prohibited by federal criminal law," said John Yoo, a University of California, Berkeley, law professor who helped write the internal memos while at the Justice Department. "The debate is whether you can use interrogation methods that are short of torture. Some who have been critical of the Bush administration have confused torture with cruel, inhumane treatment."

Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., is pushing to ban the use of torture as well as "cruel and inhumane treatment" and said this week on NBC that he will accept no compromise.

The government has been redefining what counts as torture, said Gregg Bloche, a Georgetown law school professor and fellow at the Brookings Institution. Some interrogation techniques adopted by intelligence agencies and the military for locations like Guantanamo spread to other places like Iraq, he said.

Bloche said it will be difficult for the United States to reverse policy changes on aggressive interrogation because that might require an admission of wrongdoing.

"Once you're in the game," Bloche said, "it's hard to get out."