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Pentagon Goes on Defensive over Photos, U.N. Report

Robert Burns
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WASHINGTON - Allegations of torture. Pictures of bloodied prisoners. Reminders of embarrassing acts by American troops.

The administration of President George W. Bush suddenly finds itself back on the defensive in its long campaign to persuade the Muslim world that the global war on terrorism is not a war on the Muslim faith.

In just a few days, the United States has endured a pair of blows to its image abroad: the publication of previously unseen photos from the infamous Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, plus release of a U.N. report calling for the closure of the U.S. prison at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba. Those events have forced the administration to defend its record and try to regain the upper hand in public relations.

"It reiterates how important the battle for hearts and minds is, and how poorly we're doing," said P.J. Crowley, a former Pentagon spokesman who is director of national defense and homeland security at the Center for American Progress, a liberal-leaning research institute.

On Friday, Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld fired back at U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan's remark that Guantanamo should be closed as soon as possible.

Annan "is just flat wrong. We shouldn't close Guantanamo," Rumsfeld said in remarks to the Council on Foreign Relations in New York. "That place is being run as well as any detention facility should be run.

"There's no torture there," he said. "There's no abuse. It's being handled honorably."

With the Australian news media and the Web site www.Salon.com showing pictures and documents about U.S. troops abusing Iraqis at Abu Ghraib in 2003, Rumsfeld tried to put the matter to rest Thursday. He told a congressional panel that nothing in the photos and videos was new, and all had been investigated.

"I'm told that these photographs that are coming out now are nothing more than the same things that came out before -- if not identical -- of the same type of behavior," Rumsfeld said. "That behavior's been punished."

Administration officials also sought to discredit a U.N. report, released Thursday, on the U.S. military's detention facility for terrorist suspects at Guantanamo Bay, which urged that it be closed.

Some interrogation techniques -- particularly the use of dogs, exposure to extreme temperatures, sleep deprivation for several consecutive days and prolonged isolation -- caused extreme suffering, the U.N. report said, adding, "Such treatment amounts to torture."

The Pentagon has repeatedly denied such accusations but cannot seem to escape them.

Bryan Whitman, a spokesman for Rumsfeld, said he saw no merit in the U.N. report, whose authors did not visit the prison after being promised only partial access to prisoners.

"It clearly suffers from their unwillingness to take us up on our offer to go down to Guantanamo to observe firsthand the operations at Guantanamo," Whitman said.

White House spokesman Scott McClellan rejected the report's call to close the prison compound, saying, "These are dangerous terrorists that we're talking about that are there."

A central strategy of the war on terrorism is to undercut what the administration calls ideological support for extremism, in part by improving the image of the United States in Muslim countries. Humanitarian aid to thousands of victims of Pakistan's earthquake last fall made important gains on that front.