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Rumsfeld Defends Handling of Detainees

Acknowledges some have been mistreated

Robert Burns
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WASHINGTON -- Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld yesterday defended the military's handling of detained terrorism suspects while acknowledging that some have been mistreated, "sometimes grievously."

At a Pentagon news conference, Rumsfeld criticized Amnesty International, the human rights group, for calling the US detention center at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, "the gulag of our time." The group has urged the United States to close the prison, where about 540 men are held on suspicion of links to Afghanistan's ousted Taliban or the Al Qaeda terrorist network. Some have been held for more than three years without charges.

Rumsfeld said the US military has done more than any other force to liberate oppressed people and has gone to great lengths to ensure detainees are free to practice their religion: "That's why the recent allegation that the US military is running a gulag at Guantanamo Bay is so reprehensible."

The executive director of Amnesty International, William F. Schulz, issued a statement in response, saying Rumsfeld and other officials "continue to ignore the very real plight of men detained without charge or trial."

Also yesterday, Rumsfeld issued a veiled warning to Syria, saying Iraq's neighbors should not give haven to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the terrorist leader in Iraq who reportedly was wounded recently near Syria's border.

"Were a neighboring country to take him in and provide medical assistance or haven for him, they obviously would be associating themselves with a major linkage in the Al Qaeda network and a person who has a great deal of blood on his hands," Rumsfeld said. He did not threaten any retaliation but said "people would take note of" any support for Zarqawi.

Appearing alongside Rumsfeld, General Richard B. Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said the military does not know where Zarqawi is. "Our assessment is that he has been wounded. The severity, I don't know that we know that," he said.

Rumsfeld said that likening the Guantanamo Bay prison to forced labor camps operated by the former Soviet Union, where millions perished in what became known as the gulag system, is inaccurate and "cannot be excused."

He accused the news media of focusing too much on prisoner abuse allegations and too little on "US policy guidance to treat detainees humanely."

"To equate the military's record on detainee treatment to some of the worst atrocities of the past century is a disservice to those who have sacrificed so much to bring freedom to others," he said.

There has been widespread criticism of the Guantanamo Bay operation, which began in January 2002 with the arrival of prisoners captured on the battlefield in Afghanistan. So far four men have been charged; their military trials have been stalled because of appeals in US courts.

After Newsweek magazine reported last month that US officials had confirmed that US guards at Guantanamo Bay had flushed a copy of the Muslim holy book down a toilet, the commander of the detention center undertook an inquiry that concluded there was no such incident. He did conclude that there had been five instances in which the Koran was mishandled, although he refused to provide details.

Newsweek has retracted its story.

Rumsfeld twice offered his resignation to President Bush after disclosures in April 2004 about mistreatment of Iraqis at the Abu Ghraib prison outside Baghdad. Photographs taken by US military personnel and published around the world depicted scenes of sexual humiliation and physical abuse.

"Yes, there have been instances where detainees have been mistreated while in US custody, sometimes grievously, but consider these facts," Rumsfeld said yesterday. "To date there have been approximately 370 criminal investigations into the charges of misconduct involving detainees" since Sept. 11, 2001. About 130 military personnel have been punished as a result of the investigations.