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U.S. Wants Gitmo Prisoners Held at Home

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BRUSSELS, Belgium - The United States would rather have detainees at the Guantanamo Bay prison camp imprisoned by their home countries, Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld said Thursday.

Rumsfeld spoke a day after saying he was unaware of anyone in the Bush administration discussing closing the prison in Cuba. Hours later, President Bush refused to rule out shutting the facility, saying his administration was "exploring all alternatives" for detaining the prisoners.

Human rights groups and former detainees say prisoners at Guantanamo have been mistreated. The Pentagon said last week that some U.S. personnel there mishandled prisoners' copies of the Quran, the Muslim holy book.

U.S. officials are waiting until Iraqi and Afghan authorities have the ability to deal with dangerous prisoners before handing over detainees from those nations, Rumsfeld said Thursday at a news conference during a NATO defense ministers' meeting.

"Our desire is not to have these people. ... Our goal is to have them in the hands of the countries of origin, for the most part," Rumsfeld said.

The defense secretary said interrogators had gained valuable information from Guantanamo prisoners which had saved lives by helping authorities thwart attacks.

The prison holds about 540 men accused of terrorism, most of them alleged members of al-Qaida or the former Taliban government in Afghanistan that supported Osama bin Laden's terror network.

Former President Carter this week added his voice to those of critics who say Guantanamo should be closed. Amnesty International has called the facility "the gulag of our time," a characterization that both Bush and Rumsfeld dismissed.

Last week's Pentagon disclosure of mishandling of the Quran followed a report in Newsweek, later retracted, that U.S. investigators had confirmed that a guard had flushed a prisoner's Quran in a toilet. The White House blamed that report for violent protests in Muslim nations.

In Brussels on Thursday, Rumsfeld praised NATO's missions in Iraq and Afghanistan, calling them proof of the alliance's value and saying NATO must continue to adapt its military forces for similar missions in the future.

Plans call for NATO to open a training school in September for Iraqi military officers. The alliance hopes to train 1,000 new officers each year at the school near Baghdad.

Rumsfeld was returning to Washington Thursday night, a day earlier than planned, in part to prepare for the visit of South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun to the White House on Friday.

In Afghanistan, NATO plans to expand its International Security Assistance Force ahead of parliamentary and municipal elections scheduled for Sept. 18.

Alliance officials say they are hoping to add about 3,000 troops to the 8,300 NATO forces already in Afghanistan.

NATO Secretary-General Jaap De Hoop Scheffer said alliance members should "avoid excessive optimism" about Afghanistan because recent violence has shown how fragile security is there.

Before leaving Brussels, Rumsfeld was posing for a photograph with Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov when the Russian jokingly asked him where his Kalashnikov rifle was.

"I must have given it to Venezuela," Rumsfeld replied. The United States has objected to Russia's agreement to sell 100,000 of the assault rifles to Venezuela, with whom U.S. relations have been cool.