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Inquiry finds some Quran 'mishandling'

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WASHINGTON - U.S. officials have substantiated five cases in which military guards or interrogators mishandled the Quran of Muslim prisoners at Guantanamo Bay but found "no credible evidence" to confirm a prisoner's report that a holy book was flushed in a toilet, the prison's commander said Thursday.

Brig. Gen. Jay W. Hood, who commands the detention center in Cuba, told a Pentagon news conference that a prisoner who was reported to have complained to an FBI agent in 2002 that a military guard threw a Quran in the toilet has told Hood's investigators that he never witnessed any form of Quran desecration.

The unidentified prisoner, re-interviewed at Guantanamo on May 14, said he had heard talk of guards mishandling religious articles but did not witness any such acts, Hood said. The prisoner also stated that he personally had not been mistreated but that he heard fellow inmates talk of being beaten or otherwise mistreated.

The general said he could not speculate on why the prisoner did not repeat his earlier statement about a guard flushing a Quran in a toilet. The statement was contained in an Aug. 1, 2002, FBI summary of an FBI agent's July 22, 2002, interrogation of the prisoner. A partly redacted version of the summary was made public this week.

The prisoner did not specifically recant his earlier allegation, since Hood said the prisoner was not asked in the May 14 interview whether he had made the specific statement in 2002 as reported by the FBI. Instead he was asked more broadly whether he had seen the Quran "defiled, desecrated or mishandled."

"He allowed as how he hadn't, but he heard that guards at some other point in time had done this," Hood said, adding that this allegation from the 2002 FBI report was the only one Hood found that involved a toilet.

"I'd like you to know that we have found no credible evidence that a member of the Joint Task Force at Guantanamo Bay ever flushed a Quran down a toilet," Hood said. "We did identify 13 incidents of alleged mishandling of the Quran by Joint Task Force personnel. Ten of those were by a guard and three by interrogators."

Of the 13 alleged incidents, five were substantiated, he said. Four were by guards and one was by an interrogator. Hood said the five cases "could be broadly defined as mishandling" of the holy book, but he refused to discuss details.

In three of the five cases, the mishandling appears to have been deliberate. In the other two, it apparently was accidental.

"None of these five incidents was a result of a failure to follow standard operating procedures in place at the time the incident occurred," Hood said. Later, he said there was no written version of a standard operating procedure during the first year prisoners were held at Guantanamo.

Allegations of Quran abuse have stirred worldwide controversy. After Newsweek magazine reported earlier this month that U.S. officials had confirmed a Quran was flushed in a toilet,

deadly demonstrations were held in Afghanistan, although it is not clear what role that story played in sparking the violence. Newsweek later retracted its report.

Lawrence Di Rita, spokesman for Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld, said at the news conference with Hood that at this point it should be clear that any mishandling of the Quran was largely inadvertent.

"I think it's safe to say that the policies and procedures down there are extraordinarily careful, and they're - as I said - policies that we've released, and people can judge for themselves. But I think people will see that the atmosphere down there is one of great respect for the practice of faith by detainees," he said.

In an indication of the Pentagon's eagerness to discredit the allegation, Hood briefed reporters on the interim findings of his investigation even though the Pentagon's standard practice is to withhold comment on the progress of any official investigation until it has been completed. Hood did not say how much longer his inquiry would last. Earlier Thursday, he was Capitol Hill to brief members of Congress on this.

Eight of the 13 alleged incidents of Quran mishandling that Hood has looked into were not substantiated. Six involved guards who either accidentally touched a Quran or "touched it within the scope of his duties" or did not touch it at all. "We consider each of these incidents resolved," Hood said.

The other two cases in which the allegation was not substantiated involved interrogators who either touched or "stood over" a Quran during an interrogation, Hood said. In one case not deemed to be mishandling, an interrogator placed two Qurans on a television. In the other case, which Hood did not describe fully, a Quran was not touched and Hood said the interrogator's unspecified "action" was accidental.

"We've also identified 15 incidents where detainees mishandled or inappropriately treated the Quran, one of which was, of course, the specific example of a detainee who ripped pages out of their own Quran," he said.