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## **Attorney General Nominee Hit for Prisoner Policy**

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WASHINGTON (Reuters) - U.S. attorney general nominee Alberto Gonzales faced blistering criticism on Thursday for his role in shaping administration policies blamed for contributing to the torture of terror suspects, which Democrats said had put Americans at greater risk.

"Those abuses serve as recruiting posters for the terrorists," Sen. Patrick Leahy of Vermont said at a Senate confirmation hearing for Gonzales, President Bush's White House counsel.

"America's troops and citizens are at greater risk because of those actions," said Leahy, the Judiciary Committee's top Democrat. "The searing photographs from Abu Ghraib (prison in Iraq) have made it harder to create and maintain the alliances we need to prevail."

At issue are a memo approved by Gonzales which said only the most severe types of torture were not permissible under U.S. and international agreements, and another he wrote that described parts of the half-century-old Geneva Conventions on the treatment of prisoners of war as "obsolete" or "quaint."

Republicans were quick to come to the defense of Gonzales, though a few voiced some concerns. Democrats conceded he had enough votes to be confirmed as the first Hispanic-American to serve as the nation's top lawman.

Republicans hope to have him confirmed before Bush is inaugurated for a second term on office on Jan. 20.

At the packed one-day hearing, Gonzales denounced torture and vowed, if confirmed, to abide by international treaties. "I want to make very clear that I am deeply committed to the rule of law," Gonzales said.

Chairman Arlen Specter, a Pennsylvania Republican, praised Gonzales and asked: "Do you approve of torture?"

"Absolutely not," replied Gonzales.

"Do you condemn the interrogators' techniques at Abu Ghraib shown on the widely published photographs?" asked Specter.

"Let me say, Senator, that as a human being I am sickened and outraged by those photos," Gonzales said.

Many of the questions focused on Gonzales' January 2002 memo on how the Geneva Conventions should not apply to Taliban and al Qaeda prisoners captured during the Afghanistan conflict.

Sen. John Cornyn, a Texas Republican, introduced Gonzales, a former Texas Supreme Court Justice, at the hearing, saying: "Now, I hate to ruin a good story for the president's political opponents. But there is one important problem with this criticism: Judge Gonzales is right."

INTERROGATION MEMO WITHDRAWN

Gonzales was questioned about an August 2002 memo he approved -- and which was recently withdrawn and replaced -- that outlined how to avoid violating U.S. and international terror statutes while interrogating prisoners.

The memo was behind many of the harsh techniques inflicted on detainees at the U.S. Naval Base in Guantanamo, Cuba, and other locations. It was replaced last week with a memo giving a broader definition of what could be considered torture.

Republican Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina told Gonzales he would vote for him but said, "When you start looking at torture statutes and you look at ways around the spirit of the law ... you are losing the moral high ground."

"The issue of your commitment to the rule of law is what most concerns us," said Sen. Edward Kennedy, a Massachusetts Democrat.

While critics say administration policies helped contribute to the abuses, Gonzales said, "Mistakes happen. Abuses occur. And we know that that's true in all conflicts."

But retired Adm. John Hutson, a former Navy judge advocate general appearing as a witness, testified: "I believe that the prisoners' abuses that we've seen ... found their genesis in the decision to get cute with the Geneva convention."

Gonzales would replace departing attorney general John Ashcroft, who has been widely criticized over his implementation of U.S. anti-terror legislation viewed by many as damaging to civil liberties.

Shortly before the hearing ended, Leahy asked Gonzales if he had made any mistakes in the war on terror?

"I'll be the first to admit I'm not perfect and I make mistakes," Gonzales said.

"Glory hallelujah," Leahy said. "You're the first one in the administration that said that."

Gonzales said, "Hopefully I have grown and I have learned. And I think if confirmed, it will make me a more effective attorney general."