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Victims All Around

Editorial
Baltimore Sun
May 4, 2005

HOW UNFAIR that so much of the Abu Ghraib scandal, with all of its horror and international outrage, should come to rest on the shoulders of one small young woman.

Not that Lynndie R. England should in any way be exonerated for her role in the abuse and humiliation of Iraqi prisoners, for which she will forever be inextricably linked through the photographs showing her belittling hooded, naked men, including one she had tethered on a leash.

Yet it must also be noted that she was a reserve Army private, barely out of her teens, thrust into a very difficult situation for which she had little experience, little training and little protection against superior officers taking advantage of her.

Like the Iraqi prisoners, Private England also was a victim of a military operation so poorly planned that low-ranking soldiers were forced to become jailers and police in an atmosphere where their supervisors seemingly condoned a policy of almost anything goes.

As Private England and others directly involved at Abu Ghraib meet their fate in military courts, an independent civil investigation should be launched into the conduct of the military higher-ups whom the Army inspector general has let off the hook. The only senior officer disciplined in the scandal so far is Brig. Gen. Janis L. Karpinski, an Army reservist in charge of U.S. military prisons in Iraq at the time, who calls herself a scapegoat.

Independent inquiries should begin with Lt. Gen. Ricardo Sanchez, the commander of U.S. forces in Iraq who approved the use of severe interrogation methods designed for unlawful combatants in Afghanistan and Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. General Sanchez was cleared by the Army's inspector general, Lt. Gen. Stanley E. Green, because he had to cope with a lack of senior officers to monitor Iraqi prisons as well as combat the growing insurgency.

Those are just excuses, though, not unlike some offered by Private England. They may be a factor in any punishment of General Sanchez, but they should not affect whether he is held responsible for abusive behavior by soldiers acting on his orders.

Beyond that, U.S. military and civilian leaders must consider more carefully the circumstances into which they send youngsters who are often poorly educated and unsophisticated.

Yes, ranks are stretched thin and recruitment is down, but that's a result of bad decisions at the top, not a rationale for exploiting those who hoped the military might be their ticket to a better life.

Private England's tale is particularly sad. In entering a guilty plea Monday, she told a military court she agreed to be photographed in poses designed to demean the Iraqis at the urging of her "friends," particularly a military police officer now serving a 10-year sentence for his role as ringleader, who is believed to be the father of her 6-month-old child.

A "most ordinary explanation," as Sun staff writer Gail Gibson put it. But one not nearly good enough to shield the country's top leaders from further inquiry.