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Policy didn't allow abuse, report finds

Navy vice admiral documents cases

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WASHINGTON -- A Pentagon investigation into US military interrogation practices worldwide has concluded that there was no official policy sanctioning detainee abuses, largely supporting the findings of earlier official inquiries launched after the disclosure of photographed mistreatment at the Abu Ghraib prison.

Led by Navy Vice Admiral Albert T. Church, the investigation also documents several previously undisclosed abuse incidents, including a March 2004 operation at the Afghan village of Miam Do, according to a person familiar with the report.

The report says a US infantry battalion detained the entire population of the village for four days, and an Army lieutenant colonel was later "disciplined" for beating villagers during that time.

But, noting that incidents of mistreatment of detainees occurred amid the stress and high emotions of wartime, the 368-page report concludes that the military has investigated allegations of mistreatment and punished offending soldiers where appropriate.

Church is due to testify about his findings before the Senate Armed Services Committee tomorrow.

His conclusion is at odds with critics of the military's treatment of detainees, such as the American Civil Liberties Union. The ACLU, which has made public thousands of documents about alleged detainee abuses through a Freedom of Information Act lawsuit, has called for an independent investigation into the interrogation policies set by civilian leaders of the Pentagon.

"Abuse of detainees was widespread in Iraq and Afghanistan," ACLU staff attorney Jameel Jaffer said earlier this week. "In some small number of cases, low-ranking soldiers have been punished. But in light of the hundreds of abuses that we now know to have taken place, it is increasingly difficult to understand why no senior official, civilian or military, has been held accountable."

Church's report documents the evolution of US military interrogation policies between 2002 and 2004, when there was confusion in different theaters of war about what was permissible and what was not. Because President Bush decided that the Geneva Conventions would not apply to the Afghanistan war and the US detention facility at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, but would apply to Iraq, there were different rules in different places.

As interrogators moved from one location to another, techniques migrated with them. Still, the report is said to conclude that there was never an official policy that allowed interrogators to torture detained suspects -- despite the incidents it describes, such as the four-day detention of the Miam Do villagers.

A military website, defendamerica.mil, contains an account of a battle at Miam Do that began on March 18, 2004. According to the website, two US soldiers and one Afghan National Army soldier were killed during an initial firefight.

The account says that coalition forces then "cordoned off the area" and were fired on again the next day, later calling in airstrikes. After the bombing, the soldiers found Taliban propaganda and

"approximately one ton of ammunition and weapons including rockets, mines, machine guns, and rocket propelled grenade launchers" in a village compound.

The account on the military website does not mention what happened next at Miam Do.

The report also cites the well-publicized case of Lieutenant Colonel Allen West, who is facing a court martial for beating an Iraqi detainee and firing a gun near the detainee's head in a mock execution during an interrogation. At his trial, West said he knew he used the wrong techniques, but he felt the aggressive tactics were necessary.

Church's report is one of a series of inquiries commissioned by the Pentagon in the wake of the Abu Ghraib scandal.

Previous inquiries, notably one by a panel headed by former secretary of defense James Schlesinger, focused specifically on what happened at Abu Ghraib.

The Schlesinger report, delivered in August 2004, blamed "failure of leadership" throughout the chain of command -- including Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld -- for abuses at Abu Ghraib. But his panel found no evidence of an official policy sanctioning abuse.

The mandate given to Church, who reached a similar conclusion, was to look past Abu Ghraib and review interrogation practices around the world.

"He has access to everything," a senior Army official said of Church during an August 2004 background briefing.