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Clear the air at Guantánamo Bay

OUR OPINION: CONGRESS SHOULD INVESTIGATE PRISONER ABUSE

Editorial
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There seems no end to the complaints about abuses at U.S. military prisons. Thank federal courts and defense lawyers for bringing to light the latest allegations of religious abuse of terror suspects at Guantánamo Bay Naval Base. Add this to the questionable treatment that should be investigated there, a prison that, unlike Abu Ghraib, was tightly controlled by the Pentagon from its inception.

Respect Islam

The allegations raise concerns about what the military says in public and does in private. Military authorities consistently have described prisoner treatment at Guantánamo Bay as being respectful of Islam, the faith of accused Taliban and al Qaeda captives. Though these men were supposed to be the "worst of the worst" terror suspects, they were issued Korans and prayer rugs, called to prayers five times a day and provided a Muslim-appropriate diet. The point was to demonstrate America's religious tolerance and project U.S. understanding that a few, violent, religious zealots don't define Islam or its practitioners.

Yet recently declassified court documents allege that, as far back as 2002, some of Guantánamo's staff cursed Allah, threw Korans into toilets, mocked prisoners during prayers and deliberately took away prisoners' pants knowing that Muslims can't pray unless covered. Imagine a U.S. prisoner of war who is a devout Christian having his Bible tossed into the toilet or his rosary taken away. The U.S. government would rightly denounce such offenses as human-rights violations.

A three-star general is now heading an investigation into previous allegations of prisoner abuse at the Guantánamo facility. Included are FBI reports of interrogation techniques, such as prolonged isolation, sleep deprivation and painful shackling -- tactics condemned by the State Department in its annual human-rights report when used by other countries. Also under investigation are reports that female interrogators sexually taunted prisoners in ways that would humiliate devout Muslims.

So far, military authorities have denied any policy of prisoner abuse -- in Guantánamo Bay, Abu Ghraib or other facilities in Iraq and Afghanistan. Although lower-ranking military personnel have been convicted in the Abu Ghraib scandal, no military or civilian policymaker has been held accountable by Congress, the administration or the military courts.

Chain of command

The Pentagon can't blame the failure on the "confusion of war" or blurred lines of authority. Guantánamo was designed deliberately to skirt the Geneva Conventions and the U.S. Constitution, although the U.S. Supreme Court now has ruled otherwise about the Constitution. Whatever happened at Guantánamo falls within the chain-of-command purview.

The smoke at Guantánamo Bay should be cleared, and soon. Can the Pentagon investigate itself? What abuses occurred, if any? Do they continue? Will those responsible be held accountable? Congress should stop abdicating oversight responsibility.