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Democrats Seek Probes on CIA Interrogations

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The Democratic leaders of the House and Senate intelligence committees are urging the chairmen to launch investigations into the CIA's practices and policies surrounding interrogation and detention of suspected terrorists, according to members of Congress.

In early February, Sen. John D. Rockefeller IV (D-W.Va.) sent a letter to the chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. Rockefeller asked that the panel review the presidential and legal authorities used by the CIA to carry out interrogations and renditions, and to review case studies of interrogation methods for their legality and effectiveness.

"Rendition" refers to a process under which the CIA transports suspected terrorists to other countries, where harsh tactics are sometimes employed to obtain information by governments that have reputations for abusing prisoners. Rockefeller has requested an investigation into the actions of foreign governments as well.

"I think there is an enormous need for Congress to review all the issues surrounding interrogations," Rockefeller said in an interview yesterday. "We should know whether any of our policies have led to abuse" and whether "we are complying with lawful practices. Only our committee has jurisdiction. It's not like anyone else will do it."

A congressional aide said intelligence committee Chairman Pat Roberts (R-Kan.) does not believe such an investigation is warranted. "Our position is this will continue to be a topic of ongoing oversight," the aide said. "We do not yet see the necessity for an investigation. We continue to look into this."

The CIA inspector general has been investigating allegations of abuse by CIA employees.

Rockefeller's request, and one by Rep. Jane Harman (Calif.), ranking Democrat on the House intelligence panel, represent a first response by Congress to the growing number of allegations by recently released detainees accusing the CIA and foreign intelligence services of torture and abuse.

In the latest case to gather world attention, U.S. authorities in late 2001 forcibly transferred an Australian citizen, Mamdouh Habib, to Egypt, where, he alleges, he was tortured for six months before being flown to the U.S. military prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Habib, whom U.S. authorities assert was an al Qaeda trainer, was released last month. He alleges that his Egyptian captors hung him by his arms from hooks, repeatedly applied electric shocks, nearly drowned him and repeatedly beat him.

Because information on CIA interrogations and detentions is considered highly sensitive, the CIA has decided to brief only the chairman and ranking member of the two intelligence committees on the subject, and then to give only the barest of details. Lawmakers have complained that such briefings are too vague, but also that they feel prohibited from discussing the matter in public, even in general terms.

For two years after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, members of Congress would not even acknowledge that the CIA conducted interrogations or had detention facilities. Only after such

matters were revealed in news accounts, detainee testimony and the military's review of the Abu Ghraib scandal have members of Congress cited potential problems.

Rules in both committees forbid lawmakers from discussing internal business, even if the subject matter is not classified.

Harman has been pushing her committee chairman, Rep. Peter Hoekstra (R-Mich.), to take up the issue and has proposed creating legislation that would outlaw some current practices, such as rendition. The committee recently added a subcommittee on oversight, and some congressional officials suggested yesterday that the subcommittee may take up the matter.

"This is a very hard issue," Harman said. "Everyone deserves a [legal] status and the ability to challenge that status, including HVT [high-value target] detainees." Harman was referring to the fact that detainees at Guantanamo Bay do not have a legal status that is generally recognized in U.S. law; nor do detainees held in secret CIA facilities, who are not yet acknowledged to exist.

"I have had some briefings" as vice chairman of the committee, Harman said. "There's no clear set of rules that apply to everyone involved in interrogations."