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## **One Year on, Public Disquiet on Abu Ghraib Reverberates**

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Senator Jay Rockefeller surprised his colleagues on the Senate intelligence committee last week when he publicly demanded that the secretive committee conduct a full investigation into the treatment of detainees held by the US as part of the war on terrorism.

"A year has passed since the appearance of photographs graphically portraying the abuse of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib prison," said the West Virginia Democrat. Since then, he added, troubling new revelations of abuses "have become almost a daily occurrence".

One year after the first pictures emerged depicting the torture and humiliation of Iraqi detainees by US prison guards, there is little question that what happened at Abu Ghraib was not an isolated event. At detention centres in Iraq, Afghanistan and Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, as well as at least nine secret locations worldwide, the US at times resorted to a range of brutal tactics to intimidate or interrogate prisoners.

According to figures compiled by Human Rights First - which has launched a lawsuit against Donald Rumsfeld, charging the defence secretary with direct responsibility for the abuses - there have been more than 300 investigations into alleged abuses involving the roughly 30,000 prisoners detained since the September 11 2001 terror attacks.

"Abu Ghraib was just the tip of the iceberg - the torture problem is bigger and more systematic than most people realise," charges Michael Posner, executive director of Human Rights First.

"Have we recovered from what is perhaps the steepest and deepest fall from grace in our history?" Edward Kennedy, a senior Senate Democrat from Massachusetts, said this week. "Sadly, the answer is no, because at every opportunity the administration has tried to minimise the problem and avoid responsibility for it."

The US army's inspector-general last week cleared four top officers - including General Ricardo Sanchez, the former Iraqi commander - of any responsibility for the abuses at Abu Ghraib. So far, after a series of internal investigations, the most serious indictment levelled at senior military officials is that they indirectly contributed to the abuses by not setting and enforcing strict policies on permissible interrogation techniques.

Many of the allegations concern the treatment of detainees at Guantánamo Bay, which remains the largest jail for those the US has declared unlawful enemy combatants to be held outside Geneva Convention rules on the treatment of war prisoners.

The American Civil Liberties Union has obtained thousands of military documents that suggest abuses there were common.

There have also been new revelations about the controversial practice of "rendering" prisoners to countries that routinely use torture. The US has long denied that it sends detainees abroad if they are in danger of being tortured, but US media reports have revealed that the Central Intelligence Agency maintained a fleet of aircraft to transport detainees to Egypt, Syria, Morocco and Jordan - all of which are known to use torture.

The Pentagon says it has been vigilant in policing the abuses and punishing the perpetrators. Indeed, it was an internal army investigation that first revealed the atrocities at Abu Ghraib.

"The Defense Department believes that, through its actions, we have taken these abuses seriously and thoroughly investigated all allegations, and where appropriate held personnel accountable for their actions," said a Pentagon spokesman.

The military has disciplined 137 soldiers for offences involving mistreatment of prisoners, but no one above the rank of major has faced any formal punishment, apart from an administrative reprimand to Brigadier General Janis Kar-pinski, who ran the Abu Ghraib facility.

In the case of Abu Ghraib, the final prosecution of those allegedly involved will open next week with the court-martial of Private Lynndie England, the soldier seen holding a naked Iraqi man on a leash in one now-iconic photograph. Specialist Charles Graner, the alleged ringleader, was jailed for 10 years in January. Yet unlike the aggressive investigations of the September 11 attacks, which led to a radical overhaul of US intelligence and homeland security, there is little desire to hold up US interrogation practices to the same withering scrutiny.

While the Bush administration has abandoned its controversial effort to find legal justifications for harsh interrogation - stating in a December 30 policy that the US unequivocally rejects torture - it does not want to tie its hands too tightly as to which methods can be employed under which circumstances. The White House has opposed congressional efforts to bar the CIA from using any violent interrogation methods and to ban "renderings".

"The politicians, taking advantage of the public's short attention span, don't want to get involved," said John Hutson, former navy judge advocate-general. "The Senate armed services committee certainly doesn't seem to be interested in pursuing it. Senator [John] Warner said that we'll leave no stone unturned but there are lots of stones lying on their sunny side up waiting to be turned over . . . everybody is afraid of what is going to crawl out."

Senator Pat Roberts, the Kansas Republican who heads the intelligence committee and who has refused to launch a congressional investigation, said last week that all the allegations had been thoroughly scrutinised.

"I am fast losing patience with what appears to me to be almost a pathological obsession with calling into question the actions of the men and women who are on the front line in the war on terror," he said.