

The following text may be printed, copy/pasted, or downloaded and emailed.

General Cites Problems at U.S. Jails in Afghanistan

R. Jeffrey Smith
Washington Post
Friday, December 3, 2004; Page A01

A recent classified assessment of U.S. military detention facilities in Afghanistan found that they have been plagued by many of the problems that existed at military prisons in Iraq, including weak or nonexistent guidance for interrogators, creating what the assessment described as an "opportunity" for prisoner abuse.

The inspection, conducted this summer by a one-star Army general, has not been publicly released by the Defense Department. But three government officials privy to its conclusions said this week that Army Brig. Gen. Charles H. Jacoby Jr. had found a wide range of shortcomings in the military's handling of prisoners in Afghanistan, including an unwarranted use of rectal exams instead of metal wands to search for contraband.

Jacoby, who was ordered to conduct the survey in May by the top U.S. military commander in Afghanistan after the military's abuse of Iraqi prisoners became public knowledge, found that just half of the roughly two dozen U.S. prisons in Afghanistan had posted written orders spelling out approved interrogation practices.

Jacoby also found those practices in need of revision and better enforcement, according to the government officials. Lacking any approved guidance, U.S. military commanders in the field were using their own judgment about how prisoners should be handled, opening the door to abuse and a loss of valuable intelligence, the officials said Jacoby concluded.

At the time of Jacoby's visit, senior U.S. military officials in Iraq and Washington had known for more than four months about photographic evidence of abused prisoners in Iraq. Senior U.S. military officers in the region had also known for more than five months about an Army report alleging abuses by a CIA-Special Operations Forces group in Iraq.

A spokeswoman for the U.S. military operation in Afghanistan, Lt. Col. Pamela Keeton, said yesterday that while Jacoby did not find any instances of abuse underway during his visit, he did find that prison officers needed better military rules and training.

She said, for example, that before his inspection, prisoners could be held for indefinite periods at temporary prison facilities, where representatives of the International Committee of the Red Cross had no access to them. Now, Keeton said, U.S. military rules bar the detention of any prisoner at a temporary prison for more than 10 days without release or transfer to a regular prison, and Red Cross representatives must be provided access within 15 days of their detention.

Keeton also said the practice of conducting invasive bodily searches among prisoners had been stopped in most cases. Efforts have also been made to curtail the number of temporary prisons in the field, she said; Jacoby's report suggested that the worst conduct may have occurred at such facilities.

Although the report represents the military's first attempt to survey the scope of prison shortcomings in Afghanistan, indications of widespread abuses there had turned up earlier this year, when Army investigators looked into mistreatment of prisoners at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq.

Many of the officials at Abu Ghraib had served in Afghanistan and honed their approach to handling prisoners there, according to two Defense Department reports issued in August. The reports said, for example, that the idea of using dogs to intimidate prisoners at Abu Ghraib migrated from Afghanistan, where U.S. soldiers noted that many citizens feared dogs; other methods transferred to Iraq included stripping prisoners, forcing them into stress positions, and depriving them of light, sleep or human contact.

Also, a report by investigators with the Army's Criminal Investigation Command, completed in May on the eve of Jacoby's visit and stamped "For Official Use Only," implicated more than two dozen military policemen in the deaths of two Afghani prisoners in Bagram, Afghanistan, in 2002. That Army report, obtained by The Washington Post, also said a senior officer of the 377th Military Police Company based in Cincinnati and eventually deployed to Iraq had admitted he knew his soldiers were striking detainees in Afghanistan, and it concluded that his dereliction of duty contributed to routine prisoner mistreatment.

The report listed a range of abuses committed by members of the 377th and a battalion of military intelligence officers from Fort Bragg, N.C., during their deployment to Afghanistan, including slamming prisoners into walls, twisting handcuffs to provoke pain, kneeling prisoners, forcing a detainee to maintain "painful, contorted body positions," shackling the detainee's arms to the ceiling, and forcing water into the mouth of the detainee "until he could not breathe." Jacoby's inspection tour occurred after the 377th had already moved to Iraq and looked mostly at procedures followed by other Army units. His 21-page report, completed in July, was not meant to be a probe of wrongdoing, according to Keeton; in fact, the officials said, he did not speak to detainees.

Also, Jacoby did not attempt to measure the compliance of U.S. units with the internationally accepted standards of the Geneva Conventions that spell out protections for military detainees. Instead, following a Bush administration doctrine, the military has maintained that unlawful combatants in Afghanistan -- who Keeton said make up the majority of the prison population -- are not subject to the conventions' strict protections.

They are subject under current military rules, Keeton said, to a standard of "humane treatment" not spelled out in international laws but consistent with the spirit of the conventions. In his report, however, Jacoby concluded that the standards and compliance with them were not uniform throughout the country, and called for more properly trained corrections experts and interrogators.

He also said closed-circuit television should be installed at a large detention center in Bagram and called for renovation of other facilities.

U.S. forces have "tightened up procedures for training up our people to handle and care for the prisoners," Keeton said. They now have standard operating procedures in place, she said, and mechanisms to enforce them.