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Gitmo military say treatment there is humane

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Knight Ridder Newspapers
December 24, 2004

MIAMI - (KRT) - Days after the disclosure of FBI agents' memos reporting humiliating, sordid mistreatment of captives at Guantanamo Bay, the military there issued a carefully worded denial on Christmas Eve that characterized the terror prison as humane.

"We do not harass, intimidate, harm or abuse the detainees under our watch," said Army Lt. Col. Leon Sumpter on Friday to a series of questions posed Tuesday by The Herald to the Pentagon's Joint Task Force holding and interrogating some 550 prisoners in Cuba.

Monday, internal FBI e-mails obtained by the American Civil Liberties Union described a sadistic brew of military interrogation techniques - chaining prisoners in the fetal position for hours, leaving them in their own feces and urine, at times wrapped in an Israeli flag - apparently to soften them up.

No dates were included in the most vivid federal government accounts of detainee abuse so far, which dovetail with prisoners' complaints in lawsuits. Government officials censored sections of the e-mails, including the names of prisoners and the agents who witnessed and reported the activities.

But in reply to the litany of interrogation tactics described, Sumpter issued a terse reply in an e-mail:

"No usage of any flag is used during an interrogation. Our Commanding General, the constant observance/supervision on what occurs within the camps at Guantanamo, unannounced spot checks, highly professional troopers and humane techniques preclude the tactics" described by the FBI.

U.S. soldiers assigned to the prison, he added, "will not tolerate such techniques. The American public can be very proud of the professionalism" of soldiers serving there.

FBI agents have rotated through the prison camp for al-Qaeda and Taliban suspects for nearly three years. After the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse scandal became public, the FBI sought firsthand descriptions of detainee abuse at Guantanamo in a secret internal e-mail exchange.

The FBI agents made clear in their memos that they did not take part in military interrogations, which operated under separate Defense Department guidelines, and instead did their own law-enforcement style interviews. At times, however, they were able to observe military interrogations, and some agents were alarmed by what they saw.

In August, a Boston-based agent described tactics that were "not only aggressive but personally very upsetting."

"On a couple of occasions, I entered interview rooms to find a detainee chained hand and foot in a fetal position on the floor, with no chair, food or water. Most times they had urinated or defecated on themselves, and had been left there for 18-24 hours or more."

The agent also described military police manipulating the temperatures in detainees' cells. One was kept in air conditioning so frigid "the barefooted detainee was shaking with cold."

A Military Police soldier told the agent "that interrogators from the day prior had ordered this treatment."

On another occasion, the same agent saw an "almost unconscious" prisoner in a room where the temperature was "probably well over 100 degrees" - and a pile of his hair on the floor. The detainee "had apparently been literally pulling his hair out throughout the night."

Yet Sumpter said soldiers at Guantanamo follow instructions from Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld to create "environmental techniques" that keep "the interrogator in the same climatic environment as the detainee."

Sumpter gave no specific reply to a query about whether the military chained detainees to the floor in the fetal position, and whether captives are held in superhot or ice-cold cells.

The Guantanamo spokesman's statements have been consistent with nearly three years of denials of abusive activities and a pattern of describing, in the present tense, all treatment of prisoners there as humane.

It was not known Friday whether the Pentagon was investigating the FBI descriptions to see when abuses occurred.

Sumpter, who serves in the Pentagon command that runs the prison, said he would not speak to the practices of other federal agencies that are also doing work at the prison. Published reports have said the Central Intelligence Agency ran a secret lockup on the grounds of the prison camp. The FBI memos made no reference to CIA activities in their descriptions of the military's interrogation techniques.