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2nd Look at Guantanamo Interrogation

Lawmaker asks if it was staged

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WASHINGTON -- A House Democrat called yesterday for hearings to determine whether the military staged interrogations at Guantanamo Bay to deceive visiting lawmakers, an allegation contained in a new book by a former Army translator who was stationed at the base in 2003.

Representative Adam Schiff of California wrote a letter to House Judiciary Committee chairman F. James Sensenbrenner Jr., Republican of Wisconsin, asking him to "conduct a thorough inquiry as to whether these allegations have any merit."

"The fact that members of the committee and other members of Congress may have been deliberately deceived is extremely disturbing, if true," Schiff wrote.

Sensenbrenner declined to comment yesterday, saying he had not yet seen Schiff's letter.

Schiff was a member of a congressional delegation that visited the Navy base in Cuba in May 2004 and witnessed interrogations of suspected Taliban or Al Qaeda prisoners. In an interview yesterday, Schiff recalled the questioning as civil and said the detainee was served food during the session.

When he returned, Schiff pronounced himself satisfied that prisoners were not being abused. "The detention facility appears clean, well-run, and consistent with all aspects of the Geneva Convention," Schiff said at the time. "Important intelligence is being derived from detainee interviews conducted in a humane manner."

But in a new book, "Inside the Wire," a former Army sergeant, Erik Saar, called into question the genuineness of the interrogations that visiting dignitaries saw at Guantanamo. Saar said camp leaders would put on "facade" interrogations to "put the best possible face on the camp when VIPs came" to inspect the operation.

Visitors "always wanted to sit in the observation room outside an interrogation booth, watching through the one-way glass," Saar wrote. "A flurry of e-mails went back and forth . . . about which detainee to schedule for these observations and what to ask him. The key was to pick someone who had already been cooperative, and the interrogator would simply go back over material covered with him previously. A foolproof recipe for faux interrogations and the VIPs were none the wiser."

Other interrogations were less civil. According to internal FBI memos that surfaced last year, detainees were sometimes shackled for long periods in painful positions, blasted by loud music, exposed to extreme heat and cold, menaced by dogs, and subjected to other "torture techniques."

A spokesman for the US Southern Command, which oversees Guantanamo, denied that the base staged interrogations. He said that they were sometimes rescheduled to ensure one was happening when visitors were on the base, and that it is common practice to repeatedly ask detainees the same questions to see if their story changes.

A Republican lawmaker on Schiff's trip, Representative Howard Coble of North Carolina, said through a spokesman that he wanted to learn more about Saar's allegations but said everything "appeared to be in order" when he toured Guantanamo.