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## **Guantanamo detainees accuse guards of religious abuses**

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MIAMI - (KRT) - Captives at the Guantanamo Bay prison are alleging that guards kicked and stomped on Korans and cursed Allah, and that interrogators punished them by taking away their pants, knowing that would prevent them from praying.

Guards also mocked captives at prayer and censored Islamic religious books, the captives allege. And in one incident, they say, a prison barber cut a cross-shaped patch of hair on an inmate's head.

Most of the complaints come from the recently declassified notes of defense lawyers' interviews with prisoners, which Guantanamo officials initially stamped "secret." Under a federal court procedure for due-process appeals by about 100 inmates, portions are now being declassified.

The allegations of religious abuses contradict Pentagon portrayals of the Guantanamo prison for Taliban and al-Qaida suspects as respectful of Islam. Commanders at the base in Cuba have showcased the presence of Muslim chaplains and the issuance of Korans, prayer rugs, caps and beads and religiously correct halal meals.

Army Col. David McWilliams, the spokesman for the Miami-based Southern Command, which supervises the prison, said he could not confirm or deny the specific complaints. They could not be independently investigated because the U.S. military bans reporters from interviewing detainees.

But McWilliams denied any policy of religious abuse.

"There's certainly no planned approach from guards to interrogators that pits Christianity against Islam," he told The Miami Herald. "The policy has been to show respect for the Islamic religion - and that runs the gamut from providing the items they need for prayer to making sure their diets are appropriate."

The accounts of religious indignities and abuses come from at least two dozen captives and a range of attorneys - from U.S. military lawyers assigned to defend prisoners to activist law professors and private corporate lawyers who have sued since the Supreme Court ruled in June that the captives can contest their detention in U.S. courts.

"On or about Christmas 2002, the head of shift banged on detainees cells, yelling Merry Christmas and cursing Allah," said New York attorney Joshua Colangelo-Bryan's notes from his interview with Jumah al Dossari, 31, of Bahrain. "Subsequently, a lieutenant arrived and ... he hit Mr. al Dossari and insulted the Koran."

And after al Dossari asked a military policeman identified only as Smith why Smith had beaten him unconscious in one episode, according to the lawyer's notes, "Smith replied, 'because I'm Christian.'"

New York lawyer Adrian Stewart said one of his 14 Yemeni clients, a man in his 20s, had his eyebrows and head shaved three times as punishment - and one time the Army barber left what his client described as a cross-shaped patch of hair on his head.

Military spokesmen would not say whether they believed that the incident was the same one for which a prison barber was reprimanded for giving a detainee a haircut described as a Mohawk in February 2003.

The latest allegations of abuses at the prison in southeastern Cuba come as a three-star Air Force general is investigating FBI accounts of harsh interrogation tactics - and subsequent reports that women soldiers used sexual taunts during interrogations. Devout Muslim men believe they must not touch women other than their wives.

New York attorney Marc Falkoff said his 13 Yemeni clients, men in their 20s and 30s, were also victims of religious humiliation.

Falkoff said prisoner Majid Ahmad, 24, told him that an interrogator stepped on his Koran at one point - a sacrilege in Islam - and that prisoners are "mocked during prayers."

Falkoff and other lawyers said prisoners also claimed to them that U.S. troops periodically blared music during prayer time or tried to drown out a recording of the call to prayers. But that's not the worst.

"The things they always complain about is their trousers are routinely taken away from them for a variety of disciplinary actions, including not talking during interrogations," Falkoff said. "Now, the reason this is a punishment ... is that these guys can't pray without being covered head to foot ... and they see this as a religious insult."

The military says soldiers take pants from prisoners who might try to hang themselves; captives call it calculated punishment because Islam requires that they be covered as they pray five times a day.

Boston attorney Rob Kirsch said detainee Mustafa Ait Idir, 34, an Algerian-born Bosnian detained on suspicion of links to a plot to blow up a U.S. embassy, told of being transferred to a no-trousers cell section known as Romeo block.

When he refused to give up his pants, he was tackled, punched and pepper-sprayed, and had a testicle squeezed and a finger broken by soldiers of a quick-reaction force, Kirsch's notes said.

"Mr. Ait Idir desperately tried to reason ... and again explained that he could not give up his pants for religious reasons since, without pants, he could not pray," the notes said. "He asked if it would be possible for him to wear his pants only during prayer. The IRF Immediate Reaction Force began to spray tear gas again."

German-born Turkish citizen Murat Kurnaz, 23, has said he head-butted a woman soldier who rubbed her breasts against his back and stuck her hand down his shirt during an interrogation, said his lawyer, Seton Hall University constitutional law professor Baher Azmy.

Kurnaz claimed that in reprisal, the soldiers beat him and left him hogtied for about 20 hours, put him in isolation and denied him food for six days, Azmy's notes said. He drank water from his cell sink.

Three Kuwaiti captives - Fawzi al Odah, 27, Fouad al Rabiah, 45, and Khalid al Mutairi, 29 - separately complained to their lawyer that military police threw their Korans into the toilet, according to the notes of Kristine Huskey, a Washington attorney.

The alleged religious indignities and abuses have disturbed U.S. military officers assigned to defend the detainees.

"From vaunted religious freedom to what actually exists for Mr. Hamdan are worlds apart," said Navy Lt. Cmdr. Charles Swift, lawyer for Yemeni Salim Hamdan, 35, who worked as a driver on Osama bin Laden's Afghanistan farm.

To help his client pass time, Swift said, he brought Hamdan \$550 worth of mainstream Muslim books that had been allowed in the prison during its first year of operation. He said censors prohibited them and explained that only Army-issued Korans were allowed.

"He did get one religious book - it was approved in two days - the Bible," Swift said.

Defense lawyers were unwilling to speculate on which alleged religious abuses involved approved U.S. interrogation techniques, and which were committed by soldiers acting on their own.

But Pentagon interrogation rules have at times permitted the use of religion as a pressure point at Guantanamo, which, unlike the Abu Ghraib prison during the early, chaotic days in Iraq, was a strictly controlled site 8,000 miles from the battle zone.

Guantanamo commanders have boasted in successive media presentations that the Army captain who serves as intelligence chief systematically strips prisoners of religious articles such as prayer beads, a prayer rug or prayer oils if they are deemed uncooperative.

"The issue of removing published religious items or materials would be relevant if these were United States citizens with a First Amendment right. Such is not the case with the detainees," said an Oct. 11, 2002, legal brief written by the Guantanamo interrogation unit's lawyer, Army Lt. Col. Diane E. Beaver.

## **MILITARY POLICIES**

A legal brief written by the interrogation unit's lawyer at Guantanamo Bay, Army Lt. Col. Diane E. Beaver, seemed to approve such methods as stripping prisoners and shaving their beards:

"Forced grooming and removal of clothing are not illegal, so long as it is not done to punish or cause harm, as there is a legitimate governmental objective to obtain information, maintain health standards in the camp and protect both the detainees and the guards."

The brief, dated Oct. 11, 2002, was attached to interrogation guidelines that the Pentagon has said were used at Guantanamo Bay from Dec. 2, 2002, to Jan. 15, 2003.

\_New guidelines after January 2003 approved "providing a reward or removing a privilege above and beyond those that are required by the Geneva Convention from detainees," but added a warning:

"Caution: Other nations that believe that detainees are entitled to POW protections may consider that provision and retention of religious items (e.g. the Koran) are protected under international law. ... Although the provisions of the Geneva Convention are not applicable to interrogation of unlawful combatants, consideration should be given to these views prior to application of the technique."