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Amnesty International Report on Guantanamo is Criticized

U.S. general says characterization is 'exaggerated'

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NEW YORK - Calling it "a shrill assessment," Army Gen. Bantz Craddock on Friday rejected Amnesty International's characterization of the Guantanamo Bay prison camp as a "gulag."

Craddock lamented criticism of the Pentagon's premier prison for terror suspects in his first on-the-record U.S. news conference since taking charge of U.S. military activities in Latin America and the Caribbean six months ago.

He bristled at the language the human rights group used in its third annual and harshest rebuke of the U.S. detention camp, which holds about 520 terror suspects.

"That's unfortunate. I don't think that's the case," he said. "I think that's a shrill assessment; they probably exaggerated for emphasis. ... I think that's an uninformed view."

Also Friday, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice brushed off growing calls for an independent investigation of conditions at the Guantanamo Bay detention center.

"The United States is as open a society as you will find," she said, and the administration is being held accountable "by a free press, by a Congress that is a separate and co-equal branch of government, and by its own expectations of what is right."

The London-based human rights group said the prison violates law through a practice of arbitrary and indefinite detention of men the Pentagon says are al-Qaida or Taliban members or sympathizers.

Craddock also took a pragmatic stance toward the anti-U.S. rhetoric of Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez, characterizing it as a family feud.

"Relations are ongoing, oil is flowing," he said. "I still have a military group in Caracas; the Venezuelans have 80-plus military folks here" — being trained or working in the United States.

On the Guantanamo front, he said his prison camp commander's staff is still searching for examples of Quran mistreatment during the three years since the prison was established. But, he said, "I don't expect anything more than probably what was announced yesterday" — that an inquiry had uncovered 13 instances of U.S. personnel mishandling the Quran — but nothing as severe as an allegation that a Quran had been flushed down a toilet.

Meanwhile, Craddock said he had already been briefed on a wider investigation of detainee abuse, which has been with his lawyers since March 31.

That probe, known as the Schmidt Report for its chief investigator, Air Force Lt. Gen. Randall Schmidt, was in its "final throes," Craddock said. "We should see something in the next few weeks so I can finalize that report."