

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

Prisoner Treatment Criticized

U.S. officials deny torture and defend practices before U.N. panel

MATTHEW SCHOFIELD
Knight Ridder Tribune News
May 6, 2006

GENEVA, SWITZERLAND - U.S. officials defended the government Friday against allegations that it's allowed the torture of prisoners in Iraq, Afghanistan and the U.S. naval base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, saying the United States has an "absolute commitment" to eradicating torture and preventing abuse.

The U.N. Committee Against Torture met the defense with skepticism, accusing American officials of playing word games and of mounting a legalistic defense rather than confronting specific accusations of prisoner abuse.

"There is the rule of law, and the rule of what is right," said committee member Guibril Camara, of Senegal.

The U.S. defense and the committee members' comments came during the opening meeting of a two-day hearing into American adherence to the U.N. Convention Against Torture.

The hearing is intended to investigate a variety of American activities, including long-standing issues in domestic prisons ranging from psychological strain on inmates living on death row to the use of stun guns by guards.

But the meeting quickly focused on interrogation methods that U.S. intelligence agents have used on prisoners taken during the war on terrorism.

"I want to reiterate the United States government's absolute commitment to upholding our national and international obligations to eradicate torture and to prevent cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment or punishment anywhere," State Department legal adviser John Bellinger said.