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Lawyer: Iraqi Abuse Was Like Act of 'Cheerleaders'

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FORT HOOD, Texas - A lawyer for Charles Graner, accused ringleader in the Iraq prisoner abuse scandal, defended piling naked prisoners in pyramids on Monday as valid prisoner control and compared it to shows by cheerleaders.

"Don't cheerleaders all over America form pyramids six to eight times a year? Is that torture?" Guy Womack, Graner's attorney, said in opening arguments to the 10-member military jury at the reservist sergeant's court-martial.

Graner and Pvt. Lynndie England, with whom he fathered a child and who is also facing a court-martial, became the faces of the Abu Ghraib prison scandal after they appeared in photographs that showed degraded, naked prisoners.

The prosecution showed some of those pictures in their opening argument, including one of naked Iraqi men piled on each other and another of England holding a crawling naked Iraqi man on a leash.

Womack said using a tether was a valid method of controlling detainees. "You're keeping control of them. A tether is a valid control to be used in corrections," he said.

Pictures of the humiliating treatment of the prisoners at the prison outside Baghdad prompted outrage around the world and further eroded the credibility of the United States already damaged in many countries by the 2003 Iraq invasion.

Apart from arguing that the methods were not illegal, Graner's defense is that he was following orders from superiors. "He was doing his job. Following orders and being praised for it," Womack told the court.

The chief prosecutor, Maj. Michael Holley, asked rhetorically, "Did the accused honestly believe that was a lawful order?"

The Bush administration has said the actions were those of a small group and were not part of a policy or condoned by senior officers.

But investigations have shown many prisoners in Iraq, Afghanistan and at the U.S. Navy base at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba also suffered abusive treatment after the government considered ways to obtain information in the war against terrorism.

The trial of Graner, a former Pennsylvania civilian prison guard who chatted and joked with his defense attorneys before the hearing opened, was expected to last at least a week.

Graner, 36, faces up to 17 1/2 years in prison on charges that include mistreating detainees, dereliction of duty and assault. He has pleaded not guilty.

Four of seven accused members of Graner's unit have already pleaded guilty to abuse charges and three have been sentenced to prison.