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No Need for CIA Abuse Probe, Republican Says

The Senate intelligence chairman dismisses calls to examine the agency's handling of detainees. But Democrats are seeking a vote on issue.

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WASHINGTON — Declaring that the CIA is "not torturing detainees," the Republican chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee said Thursday that he saw no reason for the panel to investigate allegations that the agency abused prisoners or transferred them to countries that engage in torture.

But Democrats moved to force a vote within the committee next week on whether to launch a formal inquiry on the CIA's role in the prison abuse scandal.

The standoff highlights the political tensions that continue to surround the prison abuse issue 10 months after photos of U.S. soldiers abusing detainees at the Abu Ghraib prison near Baghdad triggered an international outcry. The clash occurred on a day when the Pentagon issued results of its latest investigation, which concluded that U.S. interrogation policies were not responsible for detainee abuses.

The CIA has come under increasing scrutiny for its handling of detainees. CIA operatives have been involved in at least three cases in which detainees died in custody, and agency officials have recently been forced to defend the practice of delivering detainees to countries cited by the State Department as engaging in torture.

Amid such criticism, the remarks by Sen. Pat Roberts (R-Kan.) represented the most forceful defense of the CIA to date from a senior Republican in Congress.

"Let me assure you the Senate Intelligence Committee is well aware of what the CIA is doing overseas in the defense of our nation and they are not torturing detainees," Roberts said in a speech in Washington.

He described documented cases of abuse as isolated incidents, saying that "a small group of individuals may have acted on their own in violation of the rules." Roberts said the committee would open its own inquiry only if it found "any shortcomings" in investigations already underway at the CIA and the Justice Department.

"As it stands right now," Roberts said, "the system that Congress designed seems to be working."

The CIA inspector general's office is conducting investigations of half a dozen allegations of detainee abuse. The CIA has also referred at least three cases to the Justice Department, including an incident in which a prisoner froze to death.

Another case involves a CIA paramilitary contractor, David A. Passaro, who has been charged in the beating death of an Afghan detainee in a northern Afghan holding cell in June 2003.

The CIA continues to hold senior Al Qaeda operatives at undisclosed overseas facilities. And military investigations have cited the CIA for so-called ghost detainees kept off military prison rolls and hidden from Red Cross inspectors.

Sen. John D. "Jay" Rockefeller IV (D-W.Va.), the ranking Democrat on the Senate Intelligence Committee, responded to Roberts' speech by renewing his call for the panel to open a formal investigation. "This is an extremely critical issue before our committee," Rockefeller said in a statement.

Rockefeller said that he and the other six Democrats on the panel sent a letter to Roberts requesting a full committee vote on the issue next week. Democratic aides identified several Republicans who might support their call for an investigation, including Sen. Chuck Hagel of Nebraska.

A spokesman for Hagel said the senator had not taken a position on the matter and was "getting more facts on this, reviewing the issue."

Also Thursday, Vice Adm. Albert T. Church, the Navy's inspector general, said his investigation of the prison abuses found that murky interrogation policies were not responsible for abuses.

"My key findings: There was no policy that condoned or authorized either abuse or torture. There was no linkage between the authorized interrogation techniques and the abuses that in fact occurred," Church told reporters at the Pentagon.

Church's report was criticized by human rights groups for failing to assess blame for what they described as systematic abuse. Church reviewed several previous investigations and oversaw 800 new interviews while also looking into abuse cases in Iraq, Afghanistan and the U.S. naval base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

Church's report also included new instances of abuses, including an Army lieutenant colonel in Afghanistan who was disciplined after he detained an entire village for four days and abused many residents.

Several human rights organizations criticized the Church report for failing to assess blame on senior military officials. Michael H. Posner, executive director of Human Rights First, said the investigation revealed "an ongoing unwillingness by the civilian leadership of the military to examine the full scope of the problem."

Anthony D. Romero, executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union, said no independent investigation was possible with Donald H. Rumsfeld as Defense secretary. The ACLU has sued Rumsfeld and top commanders for allegedly fostering abuses.

"Secretary Rumsfeld authorized techniques that were clearly unlawful," Romero said.

Church dismissed the suggestion, saying, "I don't believe anybody can call this a whitewash."

Meanwhile, the ACLU on Thursday released another collection of prison abuse documents it obtained in a lawsuit against the Pentagon.

The new documents include statements to investigators by Brig. Gen. Janis Karpinski, the Army Reserve's military police commander who was relieved of her command. Karpinski said a boy who appeared to be 8 years old — but said he was almost 12 — was among detainees at the Abu Ghraib prison.

The Pentagon documents released by the ACLU also describe instances of detainees who said they were beaten, threatened with guard dogs, stripped, choked and mistreated in other ways. They also contain statements from enlisted personnel who said women were molested or assaulted while in custody.