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Meehan Demands Probe, as Suffolk Forum Focuses on Increasing Prisoner Abuse

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BOSTON -- Congressman Marty Meehan called yesterday for an independent investigation into the use of torture against suspected terrorists by the U.S. military.

Meehan, D-Lowell, who has pushed his own exit strategy for American troops from Iraq and is a member of the House Armed Services Committee, led the discussion held at Suffolk University in Boston.

The forum came on the heels of a poll released last month that states 63 percent of Americans believe that torture of terrorist suspects is justified in certain situations.

The poll found that 15 percent believe torture is "often" justified; 31 percent believe it is "sometimes" justified; and 17 percent believe it is "rarely" justified. The phone survey of more than 2,000 adults was conducted by non-profit pollster Pew Charitable Trusts.

Meehan, joined by a panel of experts and fellow Congressmen John Conyers, D-Michigan, and James Moran, D-Virginia, opened yesterday's discussion recalling the torture of suspected terrorists held at Abu Ghraib prison.

"We haven't even begun to quantify what that damage (to the United States' reputation) has done," Meehan said. "We have lost our moral high ground. Instead of denouncing torture (and stating) it is never acceptable, this administration seems to be continually looking for an exception to the rule."

The topic of torture will likely surface on Capitol Hill this week, as congressmen expect to see a final version of the Defense Authorization Bill take the floor for a vote.

Whether the bill will contain Sen. John McCain's amendment to prohibit torture entirely -- an amendment supported wholeheartedly by Meehan and other congressmen present -- remains to be seen.

"The McCain amendment needs to be passed, because (the military) need consistent policies to implement," said Moran. "They can't be given such inconsistent policies that they do not carry out their mission in an honorable way."

Torturing suspected terrorists also puts U.S. troops at risk for torture, should they be captured, he added.

“Anything we do is gonna be done to us,” Moran said. “And we have no moral authority to stand up and say you violated this stature... if we violated them. And we did violate them. It will come back to haunt us.”

Kristine Huskey, an attorney currently representing detainees at Guantanamo Bay, shared some details of the torture suspected terrorists have suffered while in U.S. custody.

“What I'm talking about is beating, broken bones... isolation, threats of being raped, threats of death,” she said. “My clients are real people. They are not those people. They have brothers and sisters and wives.”

Four years ago, said Conyers, he would have had a hard time believing that America was capable of torture. But with news of additional torture charges cropping up again and again, there is no choice but to act on it, he said.

“(Not halting the torture) means we give up the ability to be leaders in the world that can be counted on,” he said.

Panelists claimed there is no way to know for sure whether a suspect is truly hiding information, and that many innocent people have been tortured needlessly and cruelly throughout history for that reason.

“We know that thousands and thousands of innocent people have been tortured throughout history... because they were presumed to be terrorists or have information,” said panel expert Bill Schultz, executive director of Amnesty International.

Chelmsford resident Bill Curry, who did not attend yesterday's forum, belongs to the 63 percent of Americans who consider torture justifiable in some cases.

Curry's son-in-law, Andrew Curry Green, was on American Airlines Flight 11 when it crashed into the Twin Towers during the 9/11 attacks.

Curry doesn't condone the kind of humiliation that was revealed in the photos of Abu Ghraib prisoners, and he agrees with Meehan that it's time for an independent investigation of the torture conducted at Abu Ghraib. But he believes some form of torture would be valuable if it could save the lives of the hundreds who died in the 9/11 tragedy.

“Having suffered this indirectly, Meehan and others who have not... sacrificed any family members are in a poor position to take that approach,” he said.

Curry, who spent five years in the Air Force, said the military trained him to use torture tactics if necessary.

“Part of the education is that you have to protect yourself,” he said. “And if you want to get information out of someone you had to use direct means. That was part of your survival.”

Despite the poll's results, Schultz said Americans tend to change their stance on torture after considering two

things: that torture does not reflect American values, and that it damages the country's reputation overseas.