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Psychologists Told They Must Report Torture

A leading group of psychologists says participating in or ignoring torture is unethical.

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Amid renewed focus on the role of mental health workers in U.S. military interrogations, the American Psychological Association is reminding its 150,000 members of their ethical obligations to expose any abuses they see.

The APA's Task Force on Psychological Ethics and National Security issued the report following successive news articles that described health professionals consulting on interrogations at the U.S. detention center for suspected terrorists at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba.

APA members may assist in interrogations, the association said. But it reminded that ``psychologists have an ethical obligation to be alert to and report any acts of torture or cruel or inhuman treatment to appropriate authorities."

It added: ``Psychologists who serve in the role of supporting an interrogation do not use health care related information to the detriment of an individual's safety and well-being."

Recent reports in The New Yorker magazine and The New York Times have described, in detail, the use of so-called "Biscuit Teams" -- the nickname for Behavioral Science Consultation Teams -- at Guantánamo to assist in interrogation strategy. Biscuit team members include a psychologist, a psychiatrist and a medical assistant.

FBI eyewitness accounts of U.S. military interrogations, as well as claims by detainees, describe captives being left to foul and urinate on themselves and being disoriented with strobe lights and loud music to break them and get them to cooperate with their interrogators.

Also this week, the New Yorker reports on similarities between so-called advertent or unauthorized episodes of mistreatment of the Koran at Guantánamo and simulated desecration of the Bible some years ago in a U.S. Navy training program.

According to the article, a Navy survival course subjected sailors to mock prison camps and mock interrogation that included so-called Bible trashing -- to simulate how enemy captors might use Americans' religious faith against them, and therefore toughen them up.

Detainees and former captives at Guantánamo have alleged through their lawyers and through affidavits that the U.S. forces defiled their Korans and used Islam as a weapon at the prison, which opened in January 2002.

U.S. military officials say they respect the captives' religion.

But they have acknowledged a few episodes or what they called unintentional mistreatment of the Koran.

For example, in March, according to a military account, a soldier stepped outside a barracks for captives to relieve himself -- not realizing that his urine was sucked through the ventilation system and splashed on a prisoner and his Koran.

The military said the soldier reported himself, and the captive got clean clothes and a new Koran.

The trooper was reassigned to gate guard duty -- away from the prisoners.