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New Papers Suggest Detainee Abuse Was Widespread

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The Bush administration is facing a wave of new allegations that the abuse of foreign detainees in U.S. military custody was more widespread, varied and grave in the past three years than the Defense Department has long maintained.

New documents released yesterday detail a series of probes by Army criminal investigators into multiple cases of threatened executions of Iraqi detainees by U.S. soldiers, as well as of thefts of currency and other private property, physical assaults, and deadly shootings of detainees at detention camps in Iraq.

In many of the newly disclosed cases, Army commanders chose noncriminal punishments for those involved in the abuse, or the investigations were so flawed that prosecutions could not go forward, the documents show. Human rights groups said yesterday that, as a result, the penalties imposed were too light to suit the offenses.

The complaints arose from several thousand new pages of internal reports, investigations and e-mails from different agencies, which, with other documents released in the past two weeks, paint a finer-grained picture of military abuse and criminal behavior at prisons in Cuba, Iraq and Afghanistan than previously available.

The documents disclosed by a coalition of groups that had sued the government to obtain them make it clear that both regular and Special Forces soldiers took part in the abuse, and that the misconduct included shocking detainees with electric guns, shackling them without food and water, and wrapping a detainee in an Israeli flag.

The variety of the abuse and the fact that it occurred over a three-year period undermine the Pentagon's past insistence -- arising out of the summertime scandal surrounding the mistreatment at Baghdad's Abu Ghraib prison -- that the abuse occurred largely during a few months at that prison, and that it mostly involved detainee humiliation or intimidation rather than the deliberate infliction of pain.

After the latest revelations, including the disclosures that officials in other federal agencies had objected to these actions by soldiers -- to the point of urging, in some cases, war crimes prosecutions -- White House spokesman Scott McClellan responded yesterday with a promise that President Bush expects a full investigation and corrective actions "to make sure that abuse does not occur again."

The details of the abuse appeared to catch some administration officials by surprise, although five agencies for weeks have been culling releasable records from their files, under an agreement worked out by U.S. District Judge Alvin K. Hellerstein. He was responding to a Freedom of Information Act lawsuit filed by five independent groups seeking anything pertinent to detainee deaths, abuse and transfers to other countries since Sept. 11, 2001.

McClellan said that he did not know whether the White House was informed about the incidents detailed in the documents released on Monday. These included the use of dogs to intimidate prisoners at the U.S. military prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and the impersonation of FBI agents by military interrogators -- two of many practices that provoked concern among FBI agents stationed there.

"In terms of specifics, this information is becoming public, so we're becoming aware of more information as it becomes public, as you are," McClellan said. He also said that he did not know

whether FBI Director Robert S. Mueller III has notified the Defense Department about his concerns but that the Pentagon takes abuse allegations "very seriously."

Amrit Singh -- a lawyer for the American Civil Liberties Union, one of the four groups that sued to obtain the documents -- said that she thinks the disclosure requirement will eventually encompass hundreds of thousands of pages of internal administration documents, although only 9,000 pages have been released so far. Yesterday, the judge told the CIA that it could not delay making its own disclosures until an internal probe of the abuse is completed, Singh said.

"What the documents show so far was that the abuse was widespread and systemic, that it was the result of decisions taken by high-ranking officials, and that the abuse took place within a culture of secrecy and neglect," Singh said.

Col. Joseph Curtin, the Army's top spokesman, urged a different view of the documents released yesterday, all drawn from the Army's Criminal Investigation Command. In detailing internal probes of 46 cases of misconduct, they show "that the Army does take seriously and investigates any allegation of detainee abuse," he said.

The new documents include several incidents of threatened executions of teenage and adult Iraqi detainees. In one instance, a soldier in a unit that lacked any training in interrogation -- but was nonetheless assigned to process and question detainees -- acknowledged forcing two men to their knees, placing bullets in their mouths, ordering them to close their eyes, and telling them they would be shot unless they answered questions about a grenade incident. He then took the bullets, and a colleague pretended to load them in the chamber of his M-16 rifle.

The documents indicate that the perpetrator, who was investigated on charges of assault and a "law of war violation," was given a nonjudicial punishment by his commander. Threatening detainees with physical harm to compel their testimony is a violation of the Geneva Conventions.

In a second case, Army investigators concluded that a sergeant committed offenses including assault, dereliction of duty and cruelty when he conducted "a mock execution of an Iraqi teenager" in front of the boy's father and brother, who were suspected of looting an ammunition factory. Investigators also found that the actions were condoned by a lieutenant who conspired with the sergeant.

An investigative report also details an incident two days earlier, in which the lieutenant ordered a suspected looter to kneel, pointed a 9mm pistol at his head and then pulled the gun away just as he fired a shot. The outcome of both cases is unclear from the records released yesterday.

The documents also divulge a probe of the beatings of three mosque security guards in Baghdad in September 2003. After being arrested and cuffed during a search, the three Iraqis were kicked, stomped and dragged by a group of U.S. soldiers. Five soldiers were given reprimands and reductions in rank after being found guilty of maltreatment of prisoners, assault and other charges, the records show.

In another Baghdad case, a U.S. soldier was accused of trying to force an Iraqi civilian to hold a gun as a justification for killing him. The soldier punched the civilian in the face, held an M-16 rifle to his head and flicked the safety off to threaten him, according to the accounts of 19 witnesses. Another soldier eventually stepped in to protect the civilian, who had been hired by the U.S. Army to guard the Museum of Iraqi Military History, the records show.

Other documents describe the death in 2003 of detainee Abdul Kareem Abdureda Lafta, 44, in a U.S. Army jail in Mosul. He "appeared to be in good health" when taken into custody, and he quickly gained the attention of MPs by continually trying to remove the hood placed on his head and talking when guards told him to be silent, the documents say. One night, Lafta was put to bed with his hands tied behind him. Even so, one guard said he spent much of the night "constantly moving around on the ground" in his cell. In the morning, he was found dead.

A doctor who examined the body told investigators "he did not know what killed him." Another Army document says he was found to have a small laceration on his head. The investigators said "there is no documentation . . . explaining the lack of an autopsy."

In another case, Army investigators found probable cause to court-martial a soldier for shooting to death an Iraqi detainee, Obede Hethere Radad, without warning. But he was punished administratively and discharged.

Khalid Odah, the father of one Guantanamo detainee, said in a telephone interview from Kuwait yesterday that the new revelations make him worry even more about the fate of his son, Fawzi, who was detained by U.S. forces three years ago. "For a very long time, every day, we heard such news but nobody believed us," said Odah, head of the Kuwaiti Family Committee, a group of relatives of Guantanamo detainees. "Now it is coming from inside the government, from the FBI and others. . . . It is very frightening to my family and to other families of Kuwaiti detainees."

U.S. military officials have alleged in legal proceedings that Fawzi Odah is an admitted member of al Qaeda and had connections to the Taliban militia in Afghanistan. Khalid Odah says his son is innocent.