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Inquiry Finds Abuses at Guantánamo Bay

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WASHINGTON - A high-level military investigation into accusations of detainee abuse at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, has concluded that several prisoners were mistreated or humiliated, perhaps illegally, as a result of efforts to devise innovative methods to gain information, senior military and Pentagon officials say.

The report on the investigation, which is still a few weeks from being completed and released, will deal with accounts by agents for the Federal Bureau of Investigation who complained after witnessing detainees subjected to several forms of harsh treatment.

The F.B.I. agents wrote in memorandums that were never meant to be disclosed publicly that they had seen female interrogators forcibly squeeze male prisoners' genitals, and that they had witnessed other detainees stripped and shackled low to the floor for many hours.

Although the Pentagon has issued other reports about accusations of abuse in Iraq, Afghanistan and Guantánamo, the new investigation, by Lt. Gen. Randall M. Schmidt of the Air Force, is intended to be the first major inquiry devoted solely to determining what interrogation practices were used at Guantánamo. The investigation was initiated in response to the disclosure of F.B.I. messages that especially concerned Pentagon officials because the bureau's complaints carried great credibility.

It remains unclear, however, how high up the chain of command the report's authors will assign responsibility for the abuses. Pentagon officials have been criticized for absolving high-level officers in previous investigations.

The new report by General Schmidt also comes as an increasing number of Guantánamo prisoners who have been released are providing accounts of their treatment for the first time to journalists and supportive American lawyers.

One recently released detainee, interviewed by telephone from Kuwait, said he had witnessed or learned from fellow inmates about many of the abusive practices that have been described in previous reports by nongovernmental groups like the International Committee of the Red Cross.

But that detainee, Nasser Nijer Naser al-Mutairi, also said in a series of interviews with The New York Times that detainees sometimes prevailed over the authorities after protesting conditions with campwide hunger strikes.

Mr. al-Mutairi said there were three major hunger strikes in his more than three years of imprisonment at Guantánamo. He said that after one of them, a protest of guards' handling of copies of the Koran, which had been tossed into a pile and stepped on, a senior officer delivered an apology over the camp's loudspeaker system, pledging that such abuses would stop. Interpreters, standing outside each prison block, translated the officer's apology.

A former interrogator at Guantánamo, in an interview with The Times, confirmed the accounts of the hunger strikes, including the public expression of regret over the treatment of the Korans.

The military has long contended that abuses at Guantánamo were aberrations for which soldiers have been disciplined. But in a separate report being released Sunday, Physicians for Human

Rights, a group of health professionals based in Cambridge, Mass., says that "since at least since 2002, the United States has been engaged in systematic psychological torture" of Guantánamo detainees.

The physicians' group said that it believed that the practices of soldiers in Guantánamo had "led to devastating health consequences for the individuals subjected to them."

Its report was based mostly on publicly available reports by other organizations and news accounts, but the group's investigators said that they used someone they identified as a confidential source at Guantánamo to corroborate some facts. The group did not describe the source's position or responsibilities at the prison.

The physicians' group said its investigators were confident of the veracity of news media accounts of female interrogators flaunting their sexuality to humiliate devout Muslims, including smearing red fluid said to be menstrual blood on prisoners.

The report by General Schmidt is intended to cover such accusations, and officials said that some former female interrogators had been questioned.

Lt. Col. Jim Marshall, a spokesman for the United States Southern Command, said Friday that General Schmidt submitted an initial report March 31; the report's authors were still writing their findings, and military lawyers were reviewing them. A final version will probably be approved in two or three weeks by Gen. Bantz J. Craddock, the head of the command, Colonel Marshall said.

A senior Pentagon official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because the report has not been completed, said that the inquiry centered on what procedures were used at Guantánamo and why interrogators thought they were acceptable. The official said there was no evidence of physical mistreatment, but investigators were examining whether interrogators improperly humiliated prisoners or used psychological abuse.

The Pentagon official said that the Schmidt report found that some interrogators devised plans that they thought were legal and proper, but in hindsight and with some clearer judgment might have been found to violate permissible standards.

"People determined which interrogation technique they would use, made interrogation plans and wrote them out," the Pentagon official said. "In retrospect, however, how they applied those judgments to a particular technique is what one might want to question."

Confusion among interrogators and military commanders over how to employ interrogation techniques permitted by the Army's field manual has emerged as a persistent problem in several of the military's investigations into the abuse of prisoners at the Abu Ghraib prison outside Baghdad, and at other military detention centers in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Army is preparing to issue a new interrogation manual that expressly prohibits harsh techniques that were revealed during the detainee-abuse scandal.

Mr. al-Mutairi, the released Kuwaiti detainee, described the camp environment as one in which authorities sought to keep prisoners thoroughly obedient.

He said the first hunger strike, which spread through word of mouth, was generally caused by the prisoners' despondency over not knowing what would eventually happen to them. It lasted several days, he said, and ended after the authorities released the first handful of detainees and transferred them back to Afghanistan.

He said that guards and interrogators used that transfer as an example to give people hope. "They said, 'This could be you,' and people started to eat again," Mr. al-Mutairi said through an interpreter.

The second hunger strike was to protest treatment during interrogations, including the use of sexual taunting by female interrogators. It ended more ambiguously, he said. The International Committee of the Red Cross, in a confidential June 2003 report, said the use of sexual taunts by female interrogators was prevalent in 2002 and early 2003, but stopped abruptly in the middle of that year.

The third hunger strike was over the treatment of the copies of the Koran, given to each prisoner as part of a package of religious items that the military publicizes as evidence of its religious tolerance.

Mr. al-Mutairi said that the treatment of detainees improved the most just before tribunals began last year. In the tribunals, each prisoner was allowed to go before a three-officer panel to determine if he had been properly imprisoned as an unlawful enemy combatant.

"In general, everybody was behaving very good then," he said, "very professional. Maybe they got orders from the top, but I don't know why."