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The Qur'an Question

In 31,000 documents the Pentagon has reviewed, there are allegations—but Defense says none is substantiated.

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What really happened at Guantanamo? Last week, amid the heat of the controversy over NEWSWEEK's retracted story, new details about the issue of alleged mistreatment of the Qur'an emerged.

The International Committee of the Red Cross announced that it had provided the Pentagon with confidential reports about U.S. personnel disrespecting or mishandling Qur'ans at Gitmo in 2002 and 2003. Simon Schorno, an ICRC spokesman, said the Red Cross had provided "several" instances that it believed were "credible." The ICRC report included three specific allegations of offensive treatment of the Qur'an by guards. Defense Department spokesman Lawrence Di Rita would not comment on these allegations except to say that the Gitmo commanders routinely followed up ICRC reports, including these, and could not substantiate them. He then gave what is from the Defense Department point of view more context and important new information.

It is clear that in 2002, military investigators became frustrated by the unresponsiveness of some high-profile terror suspects, including one who had close contact with the 9/11 hijackers. At the time, fears of another attack from Al Qaeda were running high, and the Pentagon was determined to make the terror suspects talk. The interrogators asked for, and received, Pentagon permission to use tactics like isolation and sleep deprivation. Less clear, however, is what happened to more run-of-the-mill detainees among the 800 or so housed at Guantanamo at the time.

According to Di Rita, when the first prisons were built for suspected terrorists at Guantanamo in early 2002, prison guards were instructed to respect the detainees' religious rituals. The prisoners were given Qur'ans, which they hung from the walls of their cells in cotton surgical masks provided by the prison. Log entries by the guards indicate that in about a dozen cases, the detainees themselves somehow damaged their Qur'ans. In one case a prisoner allegedly ripped up a Qur'an; in another a prisoner tore the cover off his Qur'an. In three cases, detainees tried to stuff pages from their Qur'ans down their toilets, according to the Defense Department's account of what is in the guards' reports. (NEWSWEEK was not permitted to see the log items.) The log entries do not indicate why the detainees might have done this, said Di Rita, and prison commanders concluded that certain hard-core prisoners would try to agitate the other detainees by alleging disrespect for Muslim articles of faith.

In light of the controversy, one of these incidents bears special notice. Last week, NEWSWEEK interviewed Command Sgt. John VanNatta, who served as the prison's warden from October 2002 to the fall of 2003. VanNatta recounted that in 2002, the inmates suddenly started yelling that the guards had thrown a Qur'an on or near an Asian-style squat toilet. The guards found an inmate who admitted that he had dropped his Qur'an near his toilet. According to VanNatta, the inmate then was taken cell to cell to explain this to other detainees to quell the unrest. But the incident could partly account for the multiple allegations among detainees, including one by a released British detainee in a lawsuit that claims that guards flushed Qur'ans down toilets.

In fewer than a dozen log entries from the 31,000 documents reviewed so far, said Di Rita, there is a mention of detainees' complaining that guards or interrogators mishandled their Qur'ans. In one case, a female guard allegedly knocked a Qur'an from its pouch onto the detainee's bed. In another alleged case, said Di Rita, detainees became upset after two MPs, looking for

contraband, felt the pouch containing a prisoner's Qur'an. While questioning a detainee, an interrogator allegedly put a Qur'an on top of a TV set, took it off when the detainee complained, then put it back on. In another alleged instance, guards somehow sprayed water on a detainee's Qur'an. This handful of alleged cases came out of thousands of daily interactions between guards and prisoners, said Di Rita. None has been substantiated yet, he said.

In December 2002, a guard inadvertently knocked a Qur'an from its pouch onto the floor of a detainee's cell, Di Rita said. A number of detainees protested. That January, partly in response to the incident and partly to provide precise guidelines for new guards and interrogators, the Guantanamo commanders issued precise rules to respect the "cultural dignity of the Koran thereby reducing the friction over the searching of the Korans." Only chaplains or Muslim interpreters were allowed to inspect detainees' Qur'ans. "Two hands will be used at all times when handling Korans in a manner signaling respect and reverence," the rules state. "Ensure that the Koran is not placed in offensive areas such as the floor, near the toilet or sink, near the feet, or dirty/wet areas..."

Di Rita said that the Pentagon may look further into the reports found in the logs. The Pentagon is not ruling out the possibility of finding credible reports of Qur'an desecration. But so far, said Di Rita, it has not found any.