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American Justice Bush Needs to Address Prisoner Abuse Concerns

Editorial
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Three new developments indicate that the issue of U.S. humane treatment of prisoners taken in Iraq and Afghanistan and perhaps elsewhere is still not being addressed by the Bush administration.

Absent such high-level attention to the issue, it is still the case, nearly four years after the post-9/11 hostilities began, that U.S. practice is not consistent with American principles of justice and humanity. It is also clearly the case that the United States cannot realistically expect captors of Americans to respect civilized norms either, in return, given the U.S. record.

What happened at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, documented by the horrible photographs that appeared, leaves no room for debate. Nonetheless, results released Friday of an investigation conducted by the Army inspector general cleared four of five senior officers said to be involved of any guilt for what occurred there. The fifth, Brig. Gen. Janis Karpinski, was relieved of her command and received a written reprimand. She continues to maintain strenuously and publicly that she has been made the scapegoat for the actions of her superiors. Seven low-ranking soldiers are the only ones to have actually been punished for Abu Ghraib.

On Thursday, a senior U.N. human rights monitor accused U.S. military forces and civilian contractors in Afghanistan of acting outside the law by carrying out arbitrary arrests and detentions, and of committing abusive practices, including torture.

Pointing to the minimum level at which such issues should be addressed now, the human rights group Human Rights Watch called on Saturday for a special prosecutor to be appointed to look into the roles of Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld and former CIA Director George J. Tenet. The organization said Mr. Rumsfeld's and Mr. Tenet's actions in setting rules for the handling of prisoners captured and held by U.S. forces or passed along by them to other countries' authorities to hold and interrogate should be examined. Human Rights Watch cited cases in Afghanistan and Iraq and at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba as the basis for their request.

There continues to be no active response from the Bush administration to expressions of such concerns about U.S. practices. Senate intelligence committee Vice Chairman John D. Rockefeller, D- W.Va., said last week that Congress has largely ignored the issue as well and proposed in an amendment to an appropriations bill that an inquiry be carried out. That is, indeed, thin gruel, if it ever happens.

It isn't that someone should be punished for torturing and mistreating prisoners, but if Washington were to deal promptly and effectively with such incidents, removing the impression of impunity, it might bring them to an end.

American torture needs to stop. Americans need to get a strong, clear signal from their government that torture or mistreatment of captured prisoners will not be tolerated. Given the fundamental nature of that requirement for a country that is supposed to be spreading freedom around the world, it is astonishing and appalling that the matter remains unresolved nearly four years after combat began.

