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Malaysians burn U.S. flag to protest Koran issue

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KUALA LUMPUR (Reuters) - Protesters burned replicas of the flags of the United States and Israel in the Malaysian capital on Friday to show displeasure over reports of Americans desecrating the Koran.

The issue of whether personnel at a U.S. prison in Guantanamo Bay threw the Muslim holy book in a toilet has generated controversy globally in recent weeks, sparking violent protests in some Muslim nations and rioting in Afghanistan that killed 16.

In Kuala Lumpur, about 300 people shouted slogans and waved placards as they streamed out of a mosque soon after noon prayers and gathered outside the American embassy to listen to speeches condemning the incident.

The crowd shouted "Allahu Akbar," or "God is Greatest," and displayed banners reading "Stop Your Islamophobic Madness" and "Go to Hell U.S." before setting ablaze cardboard replicas of the Stars and Stripes and the Israeli flag.

"We sent a memo to express our outrage at the desecration of the Koran," Hassan Ali, a leader of the Islamic opposition Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS) that organized the protest, told reporters. "This is an insult to all Muslims."

Police said there were no arrests. The protesters, who brandished a styrofoam replica of a toilet bowl with a U.S. flag placed inside it, jostled with police and set off small fire crackers before dispersing peacefully.

"We are certainly investigating any allegations, although so far these allegations have been withdrawn by Newsweek," an embassy official told demonstrators who gave him a protest note. The Bush administration has denounced as wrong a May 9 Newsweek article, later retracted by the magazine, that stated U.S. interrogators at Guantanamo had flushed a Koran down a toilet to try to make detainees talk.

On Thursday, the commander of the prison at Guantanamo Bay said the U.S. military had identified five incidents of the "mishandling of a Koran" but found no credible evidence the Muslim holy book had been flushed down a toilet.

The United States now holds about 520 detainees at Guantanamo, a high-security prison opened in January 2002 for non-U.S. citizens caught in the U.S. war on terrorism.