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Senate Panel Seeks US Policy on Detainee Treatment

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WASHINGTON (Reuters) - The Senate Armed Services Committee called on Thursday for a legal definition of inhumane treatment of military detainees as it pressed the Bush administration to comply with a law banning mistreatment of such prisoners.

The committee called for a legal opinion from federal departments to pin the administration down on its treatment of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay and other terrorism suspects as lawmakers cleared a \$517.7 billion defense authorization bill.

The measure seeks the administration's stance on whether techniques such as forcing an inmate to wear women's underwear or simulating the sensation of drowning complied with the law passed last year barring cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment of prisoners.

The measure "shows bipartisan dissatisfaction" with the Bush administration's response on setting out a clear policy on detainee treatment, a committee aide said.

Over President George W. Bush's objections, Congress last year passed a law spearheaded by Arizona Republican John McCain that set standards for treating military prisoners in the wake of abuses at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq and harsh interrogations at the Guantanamo base in Cuba.

McCain was tortured as a war prisoner in Vietnam.

Bush initially threatened to veto a bill with the torture ban, saying it would hinder the ability to obtain information to combat terrorism. He finally bowed to congressional pressure and signed it.

The law called for interrogators to abide by standards in the Army Field Manual. But the revised manual has been delayed repeatedly, leaving standards unclear, a Senate aide said.

The Armed Services committees of the Senate and House of Representatives cleared their versions of the defense authorization bill this week. Both called for a further \$50 billion for the Iraq and Afghan wars, although that money will be provided in later appropriations bills.

That \$50 billion would come on top of the \$67 billion the Senate and House have approved for the wars, bringing the total near \$400 billion.

Both Senate and House defense authorization bills call for pay raises for the military.

With lawmakers from both parties saying the Iraq war has stretched the armed forces too thin, both bills would let the Pentagon boost troop numbers on a long-term basis, a step it has resisted as too costly and counter to efforts to streamline operations and use personnel more efficiently.

Showing dissatisfaction with reconstruction efforts in Iraq conducted largely by the Pentagon, the Senate bill also calls for the administration to develop a plan among federal departments for stabilization and reconstruction.

The full House is expected to consider its version of the bill next week; the Senate is expected to consider its version later this month.

