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## **Rights Group Seeks Independent Abuse Probe**

Sonni Efron  
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WASHINGTON — Foreign governments have been citing U.S. mistreatment of terrorism suspects and Iraqi prisoners as justification for their own human rights abuses, Human Rights Watch said today, arguing that American credibility has been undermined by the Abu Ghraib scandal.

To restore U.S. moral authority, the group called for the appointment of an independent counsel to investigate the mistreatment of prisoners held by the United States in Iraq, Afghanistan, Guantanamo Bay and other unknown detention centers.

The group's executive director, Kenneth Roth, said that the Justice and Defense departments should not be permitted to investigate themselves, and special prosecutors have been appointed for far lesser offenses than the alleged torture of prisoners.

State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said it was not his place to comment on prosecutions, but said that the administration had been very clear that "we don't condone torture of prisoners, we don't condone abuse of prisoners, and that where we find it we will expose it and we will punish it, even if it takes place at U.S. hands."

Both Human Rights Watch, in its annual world report, and Amnesty International cited growing evidence that U.S. diplomats have been encountering resistance from some governments when they attempt to protest curtailment of civil liberties or abuse of prisoners.

However, a senior State Department official said Tuesday that he was not aware of any such pattern of resistance, and Boucher today called such charges "old domestic political game about the standards."

According to the two rights groups, the governments of Egypt, Malaysia, China, Libya, Pakistan, Iran, Sudan and the Philippines have also cited U.S. policies in the war on terrorism to defend their behavior.

"Westerners, and particularly the United States, are in no position to comment on the issue of human rights in light of the 'Guantanamo hell' and the scandals resulting from the U.S. administration of Iraqi prisons," Iranian President Hashemi Rafsanjani said last month.

"You Americans committed terrible crimes at Abu Ghraib," a high-ranking Sudanese official told an Amnesty International representative. "You have ignored international law at Guantanamo Bay. Who is your government to tell mine what to do?"

Moreover, the U.S. policies have put some American diplomats on the defensive.

When asked to protest the detention policies of Malaysia and Uganda, "State Department officials demurred, explaining, in the words of one, "with what we are doing in Guantanamo, we're on thin ice to push this," Human Rights Watch reported.

"This is not to say that governments around the world are abusing human rights because the U.S. is," said Tom Malinowski of Human Rights Watch in Washington. "They were doing it before any

of this happened and would be today for the most part even if it hadn't happened, but they do now have a ready-made and often effective counter to U.S. pressure to clean up their act.

"It does shut American diplomats up and it does help them mobilize a kind of nationalistic response in their countries against U.S. pressure for democracy," Malinowski added.

The Egyptian government has defended its decision to renew its repressive "emergency law" by citing U.S. anti-terrorism legislation. Egyptian dissident Saad Eddin Ibrahim, who has been lauded by the Bush administration for his democracy activism, has told American officials that U.S. policies were undermining reformers like him.

Egyptian officials say, "Americans who have lectured us in the past about human rights and civil liberties are doing it themselves when violence occurs. So we don't want to hear anymore about human rights or civil rights, national security is foremost," Ibrahim said in an interview posted on the website of Human Rights First. "That is hurting our cause."

Loren W. Craner, who served as the State Department's assistant secretary for human rights issues until last summer, said only a very few pariah governments had dared try to equate the U.S. human rights record with their own.

"I had one diplomat from a foreign country try to use those arguments with me the whole time I was there," Craner said. "I threw it back in his face. I said, 'You know, unlike my rulers, your rulers have been torturing people for decades.' Frankly, they don't try it if they know they're going to get a tough reception."

And there was no international criticism when the State Department decided last summer to withhold aid from Uzbekistan in large part because of the record of torture in prisons, said Craner, who is now president of the International Republican Institute.

After the revelations of prisoner abuse at the U.S.-run Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, Secretary of State Colin L. Powell and others "all expected we were going to have a very rough time pressing these issues, and it really surprised me that in fact we didn't," in part because Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld was immediately grilled by Congress on the scandal, Craner said.

The U.S. diplomats cited in the Human Rights Watch report are isolated cases of officials who have long been reluctant to pressure foreign governments "and they have found a new excuse," he said.

Craner said he did not know whether a special prosecutor was the appropriate mechanism to investigate prisoner abuse, but that "however high up the blame goes, the blame needs to be apportioned. We need to do that for our national credibility, to be able to say that when these things happen in a democracy, they get fixed."

A panel led by former Defense Secretary James Schlesinger said that Defense Department officials, including Rumsfeld, should be faulted for failure to oversee what was going on at Abu Ghraib.