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Suit Alleges Rumsfeld Approved Torture

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WASHINGTON - Two U.S. human rights groups on Tuesday sued Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, saying he first authorized and then failed to stop torture of prisoners in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The American Civil Liberties Union and Human Rights First filed suit in federal district court in Rumsfeld's home state of Illinois on behalf of eight former detainees who said they were severely tortured. All eight were subsequently released without being charged.

"Secretary Rumsfeld bears direct and ultimate responsibility for this descent into horror by personally authorizing unlawful interrogation techniques and by abdicating his legal duty to stop torture," said Lucas Guttentag, lead counsel in the case.

The Pentagon said it was studying the complaint and had no immediate comment.

The ACLU filed similar complaints against three other senior officers: Col. Thomas Pappas, Gen. Janis Karpinski and Lt. Gen. Ricardo Sanchez on behalf of prisoners mistreated at Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison.

The suit against Rumsfeld focuses on an order he signed on Dec. 2, 2002 which authorized new interrogation techniques for detainees in the "war on terror" being held at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba. The techniques included "stress positions," hooding, 20-hour interrogations, removal of clothing, exploiting phobias to induce stress, prolonged isolation and sensory deprivation.

Later, when evidence became overwhelming that prisoners were being tortured, Rumsfeld turned a blind eye and allowed the mistreatment to proceed, the suit alleges.

"Secretary Rumsfeld knew full well that his orders were causing torture and he knew that torture was occurring on a widespread basis and he did not stop it," Guttentag said.

SEEKING DAMAGES

The plaintiffs want the court to declare Rumsfeld's actions unconstitutional and a violation of U.S. and international law and are also seeking monetary damages for their injuries. All eight are willing to come to the United States to testify.

The plaintiffs -- four Afghan citizens and four Iraqis -- allege treatment that included beatings, being cut with knives, sexual abuse and humiliation, being locked in coffin-like boxes for extended periods, being deprived of food and water and threatened with execution and being hung upside down for hours on end.

Arkan Mohammed Ali, a 26-year-old Iraqi held for a year from June 2003 to 2004, alleges that U.S. personnel twice beat him unconscious, used a large knife to repeatedly stab and slice his forearm, burned and shocked him with a small metal device, locked him naked for several days in a small wooden box, urinated on him and made death threats against him.

Mehboob Ahmad, a 35-year-old Afghan citizen held for five months in 2003, said he was probed anally, hung upside down from the ceiling by a chain and hung by his arms for extended periods. Soldiers once forced him to drink 12 half-liter bottles of water in five minutes.

The mistreatment of prisoners became an international scandal after the appearance last year of pictures showing sexual abuse of men -- naked and bound -- at Abu Ghraib. The administration led by President Bush says only a handful of low-ranking personnel were involved.

Dozens of other cases have been brought against soldiers for abusing detainees elsewhere in Iraq and in Afghanistan but previous efforts to charge senior officers and administration officials have not proceeded very far.

An August 2004 report by a panel appointed by Rumsfeld stated that he and other top Pentagon leaders contributed to an environment in which prisoners suffered sadistic abuse at Abu Ghraib.