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Specter Criticizes Defense After Rebuff at Guantanamo

He had wanted a hearing at the Cuba lockup. He said a 9/11-type panel might be more likely now.

Steve Goldstein
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Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Arlen Specter yesterday criticized the Pentagon for blocking his attempt to hold a field hearing during a visit to the Guantanamo Bay prison camp last week.

The rebuff pushed him a step closer to calling for a 9/11-type commission to investigate reported abuses of terror suspects incarcerated at the facility in Cuba, the Pennsylvania Republican said.

First, he said, he will hold a hearing Sept. 14 in Washington to examine reports that military tribunals at the prison were "rigged."

"I have not been satisfied with what the Department of Defense has been doing," Specter said in an interview. "I think it is preferable that we have congressional oversight... and if we don't get proper cooperation, then I'm prepared to back the 9/11-type commission."

Specter initially raised the possibility in late July of a commission to investigate the administration's incarceration practices at Guantanamo. His major concern all along has been the length of time it would take such a panel to investigate and produce a report.

Specter returned Monday night from an eight-day, four-country Latin American trip that included discussions on drug interdiction and immigration. He lunched with Cuban dictator Fidel Castro and met with Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez in an attempt to ease tensions over drug enforcement.

He also traveled to Costa Rica and Mexico.

Referring to Christian broadcaster Pat Robertson's call for Chavez's assassination, Specter said it was "embarrassing for the United States to have a man of Robertson's putative stature say that."

Specter himself suffered some embarrassment when he arrived at the Guantanamo prison Aug. 15 expecting to hold a hearing. He was told upon arrival that a hearing would not be allowed and instead was given a tour of the facility and held a meeting with some interrogators.

Before leaving for Cuba, Specter said he was negotiating the terms of the hearing with the Defense Department. He agreed not to have witnesses under oath but wanted to have a transcript so that other senators could read the proceedings.

"The Defense Department declined to proceed with that," he said.

Specter said that, in addition to the conditions under which detainees were being held, he wanted to explore allegations by former prosecutors that the trial system had been secretly configured to improve the chance of conviction and to deprive defendants of material that could prove their innocence.

The senator said he had interviewed some of the former prosecutors, whose claims were reported by the New York Times. At Guantanamo, he was informed that there was a report by the Defense Department's inspector general as well as an internal investigation.

"I expected to get that report promptly, and I still haven't gotten it," Specter said. "They [Defense officials] are not fulfilling the commitments they made to let me see their response. So I don't have any alternative but to schedule a hearing."

A Defense Department spokesman said officials testified before the Senate Judiciary Committee on June 15. "The Department of Defense continues to work with Sen. Specter and his staff to address questions about detention operations at Guantanamo," Lt. Cmdr. Alvin "Flex" Plexico said.

From Guantanamo, Specter went to Havana and had a 2 1/2-hour lunch with Castro at a government building, where the senator said he secured an agreement for cooperation on drug interdiction. He was less successful, Specter said, in raising such issues as free elections and the imprisonment of dissidents.

Specter said Castro had apparently recovered from a fall and appeared "fit, robust and garrulous." Those waiting for Castro to die "may have a long wait," Specter said.

In Venezuela, Specter's meeting with Chavez also focused on drug interdiction at a time of tension between the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration and Venezuelan officials. As a result of their talks, a meeting was scheduled between the U.S. ambassador and Venezuela's minister of the interior.

During Specter's visit, Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld gave a speech in Peru accusing Chavez of fomenting unrest in Latin America. Specter wrote to Rumsfeld, gently chiding him for his remarks, saying that Venezuela might be more willing to cooperate with drug interdiction "if the rhetoric would be reduced."

The senator said yesterday that Robertson's and Rumsfeld's comments were troubling in a larger context.

"We do not treat foreign leaders and foreign governments with dignity," Specter said. "We throw our weight around. We don't have to agree with them, but we ought to be respectful. If we have evidence that the guy [Chavez] is trying to destabilize Latin America... we should confront him with it."

The Judiciary Committee chairman said he would spend next week in Philadelphia preparing for the Supreme Court confirmation hearings on John G. Roberts Jr., scheduled to begin Sept. 6.

Four weeks after his last chemotherapy treatment for Hodgkin's disease, Specter said the effects of the chemicals were slowly ebbing.

"I can feel the improvement, so I'm on my way," he said.