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U.S. methods criticized in report on Guantanamo

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GENEVA -- The International Committee of the Red Cross said Tuesday it has given the Bush administration a confidential report critical of U.S. treatment of terror suspects detained at the U.S. military prison in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

But the Red Cross, which is the only independent monitor allowed to visit the facility, refused to confirm or deny a New York Times account that its report described the psychological and physical coercion used at Guantanamo as "tantamount to torture."

Medical ethics concerns

A prominent New York attorney working closely with Defense Department lawyers who have seen the report, however, confirmed the characterization and said it raised new concerns about doctors violating medical ethics in pointing out prisoners' weaknesses to interrogators.

"The military lawyers by and large don't agree with the conclusion that it's tantamount to torture," said Scott Horton, chairman of the international law committee of the New York City Bar Association.

But, Horton said in a telephone interview, the military lawyers "think it's correct for the [Red Cross] to be aggressive. They think that's their role."

The Bush administration rejected the accusations that detainees were in any way abused at Guantanamo.

White House: humane treatment

"We strongly disagree with any characterization that suggests the way detainees are being treated is inconsistent with the policies the president has outlined," White House press secretary Scott McClellan said on an Air Force One flight from Washington to Ottawa, where President Bush was meeting Canadian Prime Minister Paul Martin.

McClellan insisted Guantanamo detainees "were being treated humanely," though he pointed out "the combatants that were picked up on the battlefield" were seeking to harm the United States.

The Times said Red Cross delegates found during a June visit to Guantanamo that U.S. authorities had devised and refined a system to break the will of the prisoners, using humiliation, solitary confinement, temperature extremes and forced positions.

Human rights campaigners said they were not surprised by the allegations after a Red Cross report leaked in May described mistreatment of U.S. prisoners in Iraq.

"We've interviewed something like a dozen people who've come out of Guantanamo and looked at the accounts of a dozen others," said Reed Brody, counsel of Human Rights Watch in New York.

"The testimony is pretty consistent in terms of degrading treatment, the use of cold, psychological pressure."

He said that the people released were probably regarded as less important than the ones still held at Guantanamo, and it was possible the measures used against the "high value" detainees the Red Cross had seen were tougher still.

Antonella Notari, chief spokeswoman for the Red Cross, said the neutral agency founded in 1863 to protect war wounded and prisoners refused to break its vow of confidentiality in presenting reports to the United States because it had proven to be the best way to improve conditions for detainees.

'Significant problems'

But she said she could say "there are significant problems regarding the conditions of detention and the treatment of detainees in Guantanamo that still have not been addressed by U.S. authorities."

"We continue our discussions with the U.S. authorities in this regard," she added.

An agency statement said its policy of confidentiality "has made it possible for the ICRC to have repeated and regular access to those held at Guantanamo Bay and to speak with them in private."