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U.S. rejects Guantanamo detainee torture claims

Sue Fleming
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WASHINGTON - The International Committee of the Red Cross has accused the U.S. military of using tactics "tantamount to torture" on prisoners at the U.S. Naval base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, a claim the Pentagon flatly rejected.

Responding to a leaked ICRC memorandum in The New York Times on Tuesday, the Pentagon strongly denied allegations of abuse of prisoners being held at the base and the State Department said it believed detainees were treated humanely.

"We vehemently deny any allegations of torture at Guantanamo Bay and reject categorically allegations that the treatment of detainees at Guantanamo is improper," said Pentagon spokesman Navy Lt. Cmdr. Flex Plexico.

He said in written comments the Defense Department had conducted a number of investigations into allegations of abuse at Guantanamo Bay and found "no credible instances" of abuse.

Citing the confidential memorandum, The New York Times said an ICRC inspection team that spent most of June at Guantanamo Bay reported the use of psychological and sometimes physical coercion on prisoners.

Red Cross investigators found a system devised to break the will of prisoners through "humiliating acts, solitary confinement, temperature extremes, use of forced positions."

"The construction of such a system, whose stated purpose is the production of intelligence, cannot be considered other than an intentional system of cruel, unusual and degrading treatment and a form of torture," the Times quoted the report as saying.

ICRC ASKS FOR ACTION

In Geneva, the ICRC said it would neither confirm nor deny the report, in which allegations of treatment tantamount to torture go further than what the neutral intermediary has publicly stated before about inmates held at Guantanamo.

But, in a statement, the Geneva-based ICRC said it remained concerned that "significant problems regarding conditions and treatment at Guantanamo Bay have not yet been adequately addressed," and it was pursuing talks with U.S. authorities.

Authorities are now holding at the U.S. base in Cuba more than 500 people detained during the 2001 U.S. war to oust al Qaeda and the ruling Taliban from Afghanistan and in other operations in the U.S. war against terror. The ICRC began visiting in early 2002.

The Times said the U.S. government and military officials received the ICRC report in July and rejected its findings.

Asked about the report, White House spokesman Scott McClellan declined to get into specifics but said the Bush administration always addressed Red Cross concerns.

"We strongly disagree with any characterization that suggests the way the detainees are being treated is inconsistent with the policies that the president outlined," McClellan told reporters traveling with the president on a visit to Canada.

The State Department said it took also Red Cross reports on the treatment of detainees "very, very seriously" but believed Guantanamo prisoners were being held in humane conditions.

"We certainly do not condone the torture of detainees in our custody," said State Department spokesman Richard Boucher.

Human rights groups and lawyers have criticized the United States for holding prisoners at the base indefinitely but the U.S. government has taken the position the detainees are "enemy combatants" not entitled to prisoner-of-war protections.

It has begun a process of holding individual trials, called tribunals, for prisoners to determine their status.

The United States has also been criticized for its treatment of prisoners in Iraq, particularly at Abu Ghraib prison, where detainees were abused and sexually humiliated by their American guards.

An ICRC report leaked to the media in May found the abuse of Iraqi prisoners by U.S. soldiers was in some cases tantamount to torture.