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US Said To Seek Fewer Prisoners

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KABUL, Afghanistan -- The US military is taking as few prisoners as possible in its campaign against Al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan, partly to forestall more complaints about its conduct after at least eight prisoners died in custody, an American commander said yesterday.

Meanwhile, a second US soldier died in combat in as many days, as the new year saw American forces come under bomb attack in the country's east and fight a suspected renegade militia leader in the west.

One American soldier was killed and three others were wounded in a clash yesterday with Kunar province militants who detonated two homemade bombs, triggering a shootout.

The mountainous area next to the border with Pakistan is viewed as a stronghold of renegade Afghan warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a former prime minister who has joined the Taliban in vowing to drive out foreign troops.

Colonel Gary Cheek, the US commander for eastern Afghanistan, said the troops under his command would be relentless in their pursuit of insurgents, including some 20 unidentified top leaders, through the Afghan winter.

But following a review of the military's policy on detentions last summer, the soldiers were taking as few prisoners as possible as they try to win stronger support from the local population.

"We are always adapting to the changes in the environment and our commanders, our soldiers, are also trying to be more sensitive to the Afghan culture," Cheek said. "I've told our commanders, for example, to minimize the number of Afghan nationals or others that they detain."

The US military, which still commands 18,000 troops here, has taken thousands of prisoners in Afghanistan since Operation Enduring Freedom, Washington's antiterrorism drive, began after the Sept. 11 attacks.

Those not released quickly are transferred to larger jails at US bases in Bagram and Kandahar, and many have been sent from there to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

However, allegations of mistreatment -- dating back to before the prisoner abuse scandal in Iraq - have hurt efforts to win over ordinary Afghans.

Spokesman Major Mark McCann said fewer prisoners were now being sent to Guantanamo, reflecting a decline in militant activity in Afghanistan. Also, detainees could be freed this year under a planned amnesty, he said.

The officials gave no figures to show whether detention rates had indeed declined, though Cheek said the three holding facilities under his control at eastern Afghan bases currently were empty.

Asked about the September death of a prisoner at his headquarters in Khost, Cheek said the man had complained that he was bitten by a snake.

A military doctor examined the man, Sher Mohammed Khan, and found no evidence of a bite. But a medic who checked on him during the night found that he had stopped breathing. Doctors were unable to revive him.

Cheek said he had yet to receive the results of the autopsy but said he was confident his troops were treating every detainee "with dignity and respect."

Human Rights Watch cited Khan's case in a letter last month to Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld.

It accused the Pentagon of dragging its feet on investigating at least eight deaths of Afghan detainees dating back to 2001 and suggested quicker action could have prevented abuses in Iraq -- a charge US officials reject.