

The following text may be printed, copy/pasted, or downloaded and emailed.

Detainees' Lawsuits Also Allege Sacrilege

Toni Locy
USA Today
May 17, 2005

Current and former detainees have been alleging for more than a year that American soldiers in Afghanistan, Iraq and Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, have desecrated the Koran -- but none of the allegations has been substantiated by military investigators.

The claims are made in some of the 65 lawsuits that have been filed in U.S. District Court in Washington on behalf of nearly 180 detainees, as well as in accounts given to human rights workers.

For instance, a lawsuit filed this year in Illinois by the American Civil Liberties Union against Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld recounts a claim by a detainee in Iraq who says soldiers allowed a military dog to carry the Islamic holy book in the animal's mouth.

Another lawsuit filed in Washington in January on behalf of 12 Kuwaiti detainees held at Guantanamo Bay alleges that American soldiers tore up the Koran and threw pages into toilets as part of a humiliation tactic.

There have been no publicized disciplinary actions taken by the military against soldiers for mishandling the Koran. A Pentagon list of 10 misconduct cases at Guantanamo Bay shows that none involved disrespect of the Koran by soldiers.

And Newsweek magazine said Monday that it is retracting its story about a military probe finding evidence of Koran abuse at Guantanamo Bay.

Whether abuse is substantiated or not, the issue continues to be a volatile one in the Middle East. Newsweek's initial report was followed by rioting in Afghanistan and other countries that left at least 15 people dead.

The Center for Constitutional Rights, a New York-based civil liberties group that represents several detainees in lawsuits, says that interviews with detainees and government documents have revealed a systemic use of religious abuse as an interrogation tactic to humiliate prisoners.

In a statement Monday, the group says that the abuses include sexual taunting, depriving detainees of long pants during prayer times, deliberate interference with prayers, wrapping a prisoner in an Israeli flag, desecration and mishandling of the Koran and, most recently, religious slurs directed toward prisoners' attorneys.

Pentagon spokesman Bryan Whitman said, "Newsweek's story about Koran desecration is demonstrably false, and there have thus far been no credible allegations of willful Koran desecration and Newsweek has produced no such evidence."

Army Lt. Col. Jim Marshall, a spokesman for the military's Southern Command, said Monday that the military did not start looking at allegations of Koran desecration until last week after the Newsweek article was published. The story had reported that U.S. interrogators in Cuba had flushed a copy of the Koran down a toilet.

Marshall said he did not know how long the inquiry would take. "We have a sense of urgency about it. But we want to make sure it is thorough as well," he said.

U.S. troops' handling of the Koran is not a new issue. It was a key cause of detainees' first hunger strike at Guantanamo in 2002, says John Sifton, a researcher with Human Rights Watch in New York.

Detainees had alleged that a soldier had thrown the Koran on the ground. Military commanders at Guantanamo Bay responded to the hunger strike by making significant changes in conditions at the prison regarding religious practices, Sifton said.

Some of the allegations, while never verified, get broad circulation. For example, In December, a former detainee in Afghanistan was quoted in a Moroccan newspaper as saying that American soldiers tore pages from the Koran and threw them in toilets, according to a BBC translation of the article.

The Pentagon says that there are strict procedures in Cuba for soldiers to minimize their touching of the Koran during searches of cells or during other contact with detainees. Soldiers are also not allowed to interfere with detainees during prayers or to touch their prayer beads.