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Newsweek Says Article on Quran Might Have Contained Errors

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Newsweek magazine yesterday said a report it had published two weeks ago that helped spark fatal riots in Afghanistan might have contained errors.

The article, printed in the May 9 issue, reported that "sources" had told the magazine that interrogators at the U.S. detention center at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, had flushed a Quran down a toilet to rattle Muslim detainees. The item, written by reporters Michael Isikoff and John Barry, added that the findings would appear in a coming report by the Miami-based U.S. Southern Command, which oversees the prison. The magazine also reported that investigators probing abuses at the Cuban detention center had confirmed "infractions alleged in internal FBI emails that surfaced late last year."

The report inflamed Muslims in the Middle East and parts of Asia, sparking protests where marchers carried Newsweek. There were large protests in Indonesia and Gaza, and in Afghanistan protests led to riots in which a reported 16 people were killed.

In an editor's letter and an article published today, the magazine said parts of its original report were flawed. Newsweek said its original anonymous source recently said he isn't sure that the Quran allegation is actually in the report, and that it might just be a story told by former detainees.

Though Newsweek sent a copy of the item to a Pentagon official before it appeared, the official, who didn't raise questions about the allegation, might not have had detailed knowledge of what was in the report, the magazine said.

Newsweek, which is owned by Washington Post Co., said it began looking into its article on Friday when the Pentagon contacted the magazine to deny the truth of the report. "Certainly the fact that the Pentagon and the top Pentagon spokespeople are denying it and saying we got the story wrong troubles us," editor Mark Whitaker said in an interview.

"This is all we've been able to find out," said Mr. Whitaker. "We suggest we may have gotten something wrong, but we're not entirely sure what we got wrong at this point, frankly."

Mr. Isikoff had relied on an unnamed U.S. government official who had been credible in the past, said Mr. Whitaker. "I know who the source is and I know this source is in a position to have seen internal documents and who has been a good and credible source in the past," he said.

In the editor's letter, Mr. Whitaker apologized for the violence it caused in the Middle East. "We regret that we got any part of our story wrong, and extend our sympathies to victims of the violence and to the U.S. soldiers caught in its midst," he wrote.

"We are going to continue to report and if we find out something more conclusive, we will report it," Mr. Whitaker said in the interview.

The allegations about the Quran are not entirely new, and Newsweek says Mr. Isikoff has uncovered other evidence of such treatment of the Quran at Guantanamo Bay. But Pentagon spokesman Lawrence Di Rita, who had called Newsweek to complain, said investigators had found nothing along those lines.

In an interview, Mr. Di Rita said the department never validated Federal Bureau of Investigation emails alleging abuse, that the military never corroborated any accounts of Quran desecration and there wasn't a charge of intentional Quran desecration in the report.

He said Newsweek was "extremely irresponsible," and called its clarification "inadequate."