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Newsweek Apologizes

Inaccurate Report on Koran Led to Riots

By Howard Kurtz
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Newsweek apologized yesterday for an inaccurate report on the treatment of detainees that triggered several days of rioting in Afghanistan and other countries in which at least 15 people died.

Editor Mark Whitaker expressed regret over the item in the magazine's "Periscope" section, saying it was based on a confidential source -- a "senior U.S. government official" -- who now says he is not sure whether the story is true.

The deadly consequences of the May 1 report, and its reliance on the unnamed source, have sparked considerable anger at the Pentagon. Spokesman Bryan Whitman called Newsweek's report "irresponsible" and "demonstrably false," saying the magazine "hid behind anonymous sources which by their own admission do not withstand scrutiny. Unfortunately, they cannot retract the damage that they have done to this nation or those who were viciously attacked by those false allegations."

Whitaker said last night that "whatever facts we got wrong, we apologize for. I've expressed regret for the loss of life and the violence that put American troops in harm's way. I'm getting a lot of angry e-mail about that, and I understand it."

The report, in the issue dated May 9, said U.S. military investigators had found that American interrogators at the detention facility at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, had flushed a copy of the Koran, the sacred Muslim text, down a toilet. A week later, when newspapers in Afghanistan and Pakistan picked up the item, it sparked anti-American demonstrations in the Afghan city of Jalalabad in which four protesters were killed and more than 60 injured. About a dozen more protesters were killed in the following days when the demonstrations spread across Afghanistan and to Pakistan and other countries.

"There had been previous reports about the Koran being defiled, but they always seemed to be rumors or allegations made by sources without evidence," Whitaker said, referring to reporting by British and Russian news agencies and by the Qatar-based satellite network al-Jazeera. The Washington Post, whose parent company owns Newsweek, reported a similar account in March 2003, attributing it to a group of former detainees. "The fact that a knowledgeable source within the U.S. government was telling us the government itself had knowledge of this was newsworthy," Whitaker said in an interview.

He said that a senior Pentagon official, for reasons that "are still a little mysterious to us," had declined to comment after Newsweek correspondent John Barry showed him a draft before the item was published and asked, "Is this accurate or not?" Whitaker added that the magazine would have held off had military spokesmen made such a request. That official "lacked detailed knowledge" of the investigative report, Newsweek now says. Whitaker said Pentagon officials raised no objection to the story for 11 days after it was published, until it was translated by some Arab media outlets and led to the rioting.

The item was principally reported by Michael Isikoff, Newsweek's veteran investigative reporter. "Obviously we all feel horrible about what flowed from this, but it's important to remember there was absolutely no lapse in journalistic standards here," he said. "We relied on sources we had

every reason to trust and gave the Pentagon ample opportunity to comment. . . . We're going to continue to investigate what remains a very murky situation."

Isikoff, a former Post reporter, gained national attention in 1998 when the magazine held his report on an independent counsel's investigation of Monica S. Lewinsky's relationship with President Bill Clinton. More recently, Isikoff and Barry won an Overseas Press Club award for their reporting on Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison.

The 10-sentence item said an upcoming report by the U.S. Southern Command in Miami was "expected" to include the alleged Koran incident -- the subject of only one sentence -- among various abusive techniques used "to rattle suspects" at Guantanamo. Since then, Pentagon officials and Gen. Richard B. Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, have said investigators found "no credible allegations of willful Koran desecration," as Whitman put it.

On Saturday, when Isikoff reached his original source, the magazine said, the official "could no longer be sure" that the Koran allegation "had surfaced" in the SouthCom investigation.

"Just as citizens," Whitaker said, "we feel badly about the fact that there's been a rash of violence. . . . Clearly, that was not our intent in publishing what we thought was a solid news item."

But critics are already pouncing on the story as the latest in a high-profile series of media blunders at such respected news organizations as the New York Times, USA Today and CBS News. In this case, the consequences -- deadly riots -- were far more serious than a breach of journalistic ethics.

But while the Pentagon is disputing the Koran incident, U.S. officials have confirmed numerous reports by detainees, especially at Abu Ghraib, about guards attempting to humiliate them with tactics that violate religious taboos of the Muslim faith. A senior Pentagon official has confirmed reports that female interrogators rubbed their bodies against the men, wore skimpy clothes, touched them provocatively and pretended to spread menstrual blood on them. The Newsweek item that triggered the violence also said the forthcoming report would describe "one woman who took off her top, rubbed her finger through a detainee's hair and sat on the detainee's lap."

The intensity of the anti-American riots, fueled in part by outraged Muslim clerics and radio broadcasts by elements of the ousted Taliban regime, took many Western analysts by surprise. Desecrating the Koran is punishable by death in some Muslim countries. Newsweek reported yesterday that agitators opposed to the government of Afghan President Hamid Karzai had seized on the report to foment violence.

About 500 Islamic scholars meeting in the northern Afghan province of Badakshan, where protests were held last week, passed a resolution yesterday urging a U.S. investigation of the Newsweek report, according to wire service accounts.

Interviews with several people in the province yielded differing views of the controversy. Javed Ahmed, 23, a sandal salesman who participated in the demonstration, said he was unaware of the Newsweek story until the radio program of Iranian, Afghan and Indian songs that he normally listens to was interrupted with news of the violent protests in Jalalabad. He was initially "doubtful" about the allegation, he said, "but when I saw it on television later that day, I became more sure it was true."

Ghulam Dastagir, 28, a bird seller who refused to join the demonstration, said: "I don't think the report is true, but these crises work for those who want to make fights between people."

Del Agha, 47, a dry-goods salesman who joined the protest, said, "Even now, I'm not sure if this was true." He said he participated because "we just wanted to tell the world that the people who

did this should be brought to justice" for "disrespecting the holy Koran. . . . We wanted to have a peaceful demonstration but the demonstration was like a car and some people who are the enemies of Afghanistan took the steering wheel and turned it in the wrong direction."

The fallout here is starting to build, and Dan Klaidman, Newsweek's Washington bureau chief, was doing cable news interviews yesterday, describing the story as "an honest mistake."

Said Whitaker: "I suppose you could say we should have foreseen the consequences of the report, but we didn't."