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## **Desecration of Koran Had Been Reported Before**

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Newsweek magazine's now-retracted story that a military guard at the U.S. prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, flushed a copy of the Koran down a toilet has sparked angry denunciations by the White House and the Pentagon, which have linked the article to Muslim riots and deaths abroad.

But American and international media have widely reported similar allegations from detainees and others of desecration of the Muslim holy book for more than two years.

James Yee, a former Muslim chaplain at the prison who was investigated and cleared of charges of mishandling classified material, has asserted that guards' mishandling and mistreatment of detainees' Korans led the prisoners to launch a hunger strike in March 2002. Detainee lawyers, attributing their information to an interrogator, have said the strike ended only when military leaders issued an apology to the detainees over the camp loudspeaker. But they said mishandling of the Koran persisted.

Erik Saar, a former Army translator at Guantanamo Bay who has written a book about mistreatment of detainees at the military prison, said in interviews and in his book that he never saw a Koran flushed in a toilet but that guards routinely ignored prisoners' sensitivities by tossing it on the ground while searching their cells.

And numerous detainees, whose stories are uncorroborated, have said to various media outlets that at detention facilities in Guantanamo Bay and Afghanistan, the Koran was stepped on, tossed on the floor and placed in latrines.

"They tore the Koran to pieces in front of us, threw it into the toilet," former detainee Aryat Vahitov told Russian television in June 2004.

Under fire from the White House, Newsweek on Monday retracted the May 9 article in which it reported that a government investigation had confirmed an instance of a Koran being put in the toilet. Newsweek editors now say their source, a senior government official, is no longer sure that the alleged incident is confirmed in the investigation.

Yesterday, the administration called on Newsweek to explain how it got the story wrong and to report about U.S. military efforts to ensure that the Koran is handled with respect. The White House, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld have cited the damage done to the United States' reputation in the Muslim world by Newsweek's original report.

Yesterday, Pentagon spokesman Lawrence T. Di Rita said previous detainee allegations have not been considered credible.

"I'm not aware that we've ever had any specific, credible allegations to investigate. We certainly didn't investigate detainees' lawyers on television saying, 'This is what happened to my detainee,' " he said.

But he added that "in the wake of the Newsweek piece, we thought it useful to go back and review to be sure."

To Muslims, the Koran is a sacred text that should never be dropped, defiled or ridiculed. When Newsweek's report was reprinted in the Arab media, it sparked public protests and riots in Afghanistan and other countries that left 16 people dead.

Several lawyers for Guantanamo Bay detainees contended yesterday that other forms of alleged mistreatment of detainees, some reported in e-mails by FBI personnel stationed at Guantanamo Bay, have helped fuel anti-American sentiment in Arab countries. They accused the White House of being disingenuous about the insults it has already acknowledged occurred at the base.

The government has acknowledged that two female interrogators have been reprimanded, one for making sexually suggestive remarks to a detainee, and the other for smearing fake menstrual blood on a captive. Detainee lawyers said the purpose of the tactics was to cause stress based on the prisoners' religious beliefs that they would be unclean and could not pray.

FBI allegations of harsh treatment of captives are under investigation by the Pentagon.

"It's a measure of how deeply our global credibility has suffered that this inflammatory allegation was given immediate credence," said Joseph Margulies, an attorney for former detainee Mamdouh Habib. "You are only prepared to believe this if the U.S. reputation has fallen so badly. If you learned that a female interrogator smeared fake menstrual blood on a detainee, as we did learn, then, of course, you're going to believe that they could throw a Koran in a toilet." Dozens of detainees have said in declassified court records that Guantanamo Bay detention officials and military guards engaged in widespread religious and sexual humiliation of detainees. Detainees said the goal was to make them feel impure, shake their faith and try to gain information.

Yesterday, several former detainees said they witnessed military police and guards at Guantanamo Bay throwing their copies of the Koran on the ground, stomping on them with their feet, and tossing them into buckets and areas used as latrines.

Former detainee Abdallah Tabarak told a Moroccan newspaper in December that he saw guards throw Korans in the toilet, according to a BBC translation of the article.

"When I wanted to pray, they would burst into my cell with police dogs to terrorize me and prevent me from praying," he said. "They also would trample the Koran underfoot and throw it in the urine bucket. We staged protests in the prison about the desecrating of the Holy Koran, so the management promised us that they would issue orders to the American soldiers not to touch the copies of the Koran again."