

Red Cross Says It Told U.S. in 2002 About Alleged Mishandling of Koran

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The International Committee of the Red Cross said yesterday that it repeatedly expressed concern to the U.S. government in 2002 and early 2003 about a series of credible detainee allegations that military guards at the Guantanamo Bay prison in Cuba had mishandled and shown disrespect to the Koran.

Red Cross investigators documented what they considered reliable allegations of mistreatment of the Koran in interviews with detainees during visits to the prison, said ICRC spokesman Simon Schorno. The committee then forwarded its concerns in confidential reports to U.S. authorities and urged action.

"We raised the issues in our reports and verbally over a lengthy period of time. We talked to many detainees, not just one person," Schorno said. "For us, what's important is that the detainees' religion and dignity is respected."

The committee said the U.S. government responded with "corrective measures" in 2003 and the allegations ceased. In late January 2003, the Defense Department spelled out procedures covering the respectful handling of copies of the Koran. The written guidelines say that only Muslim chaplains or Muslim interpreters could touch the Koran, and they offer instructions on how to do it.

Pentagon spokesman Bryan Whitman said that the agency received the ICRC reports but that there is no evidence they alone prompted the new policy. Whitman said the Pentagon has acknowledged cases of unintentional mishandling of the Koran, and he predicted yesterday that a new inquiry into such allegations would probably corroborate more cases.

It is unusual for the ICRC to publicize its findings because the organization believes it is most effective by investigating matters and advising governments confidentially.

In this case, Schorno said, the Red Cross believes the subject is already public because of the global controversy surrounding Newsweek magazine's retraction of a May 9 article that asserted that a government investigation had confirmed that a Guantanamo Bay guard had flushed a Koran down a toilet. The reported government confirmation, now withdrawn, sparked protests in Afghanistan and other countries and resulted in 16 deaths.

"Since these reports have become public in other channels, and because of their impact in Afghanistan and around the world, we decided we could report that we had brought this to authorities' attention and that our work had value," Schorno said.