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Pentagon Confirms Koran Incidents

'Mishandling' Cases Preceded Guidelines Established in 2003

Josh White and Dan Eggen
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Pentagon officials said yesterday that investigators have identified five incidents of military guards and an interrogator "mishandling" the Koran at the U.S. detention facility at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, but characterized the episodes as minor and said most occurred before specific rules on the treatment of Muslim holy items were issued.

Brig. Gen. Jay W. Hood, commander of Joint Task Force Guantanamo, said investigators have looked into 13 specific allegations of Koran desecration at the prison dating to early 2002 and have determined eight of them to be unfounded, lacking credibility or the result of accidental touching of the holy book. Of the five cases of mishandling, three were "very likely" deliberate and two were "very likely accidental," he said. But Hood declined to provide details, citing an ongoing investigation.

Hood's comments marked the first time the Pentagon has confirmed mistreatment of the Muslim book at Guantanamo Bay. Captives and some military personnel there have made claims of Koran desecration, but in a statement last week, Pentagon spokesman Lawrence T. Di Rita said the Defense Department had received no credible claims of such abuse. Nevertheless, he said, officials were reviewing the allegations.

Hood took pains to deny a now-retracted report in Newsweek magazine's May 9 issue that said officials had confirmed a detainee's claim that a guard had flushed a Koran down a toilet. The White House, the Pentagon and others have linked that report to riots overseas that left 16 people dead.

The news conference came a day after the American Civil Liberties Union released summaries of memos from FBI agents at Guantanamo Bay that reported detainee allegations of Koran desecration. Hood played down the mistreatment as a vestige of Guantanamo Bay's early days and said it occurred without any systemic frequency.

He said most of the 13 cases involved accidental or inadvertent touching of the Koran by guards and interrogators -- such as someone bumping into the holy book, or one case in which an interrogator stacked two Korans on a television set.

The five confirmed cases of Koran mishandling involved four guards and one interrogator, Hood said. Six other "resolved" cases involved guards, and two involved interrogators, he said.

Hood said a soldier was reassigned after one recent accidental mishandling of the Koran, and another soldier faced an unspecified disciplinary action for an incident some time ago.

He added that there were also 15 cases in which detainees mishandled the Koran, including one who purposefully ripped pages out of his own book.

"I want to assure you that we are committed to respecting the cultural dignity of the Koran and the detainees' practice of faith," Hood said. "Every effort has been made to provide religious articles associated with the Islamic faith, accommodate prayers and religious periods, and provide culturally acceptable meals and practices."

Pentagon officials said investigators did not look into the claim that a Koran had been flushed down a toilet before the Newsweek article was published. While looking into the desecration claims after protests erupted overseas, investigators re-interviewed a detainee who had told FBI agents in July 2002 that guards had put a Koran in a toilet.

That interview, on May 14, with a prisoner the Pentagon identified this week as "an enemy combatant," led investigators to believe that the claim lacked credibility. The detainee said that he "wasn't beaten or abused, but that he had heard rumors that other detainees were," Hood said.

"We then proceeded to ask him about any incidences where he had seen the Koran defiled, desecrated or mishandled, and he allowed as how he hadn't, but he had heard . . . that guards at some other point in time had done this," Hood said yesterday. "He went on to describe to his interrogator that that was a problem that was only in the old camp."

Hood said "old camp" apparently meant Camp X-Ray, the temporary cells where captives were held when Guantanamo Bay opened in January 2002. But he acknowledged that interrogators did not specifically ask the detainee this month whether a toilet had been involved, nor did they refer to the original statement the detainee gave to the FBI nearly three years ago.

Hood emphasized that most of the confirmed incidents occurred before standard procedures were put in place in January 2003 for proper handling of the Koran. A broader investigation by the U.S. Southern Command into allegations of abuse and mistreatment contained in memos written by FBI personnel stationed at Guantanamo Bay is continuing. Hood and Di Rita declined to address the larger probe.

According to U.S. Southern Command documents, officials at Guantanamo Bay were aware of the importance of the proper handling of the Koran in the facility's very first days. Responding to concerns from the International Committee of the Red Cross in January 2002, command officials wrote that they needed to make sure that detainees were allowed time to pray and that they were given appropriate ways to store their Korans.

The "Koran must be kept neat and wrapped in something," according to a memo dated Jan. 21, 2002. "Can we get them a small green cloth to wrap it?"

The FBI documents released Wednesday by the ACLU contained summaries of a dozen interviews in which detainees said they had witnessed or heard about mistreatment of the Koran by guards or interrogators.

They also included new allegations of severe physical abuse of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay and in Afghanistan.

The FBI records provide at least one example in which a detainee may have lied about mistreatment of the Koran. According to a summary of an interview with one prisoner, an uprising in July 2002 had started with a claim by another detainee that a guard had dropped a Koran.

"In actuality," the summary says, "the detainee dropped the Koran and then blamed the guard. Many other detainees reacted to this claim and this initiated the uprising."

The FBI documents do not indicate whether this version of events is accurate, although Pentagon officials have recounted a similar-sounding incident. FBI officials have declined to comment.

The ACLU also released more FBI documents yesterday, including a memo indicating that military interrogators posed as officials from the FBI and State Department while questioning detainees at Guantanamo Bay.

One memo, from November 2003, refers to "DOD interrogators at Guantanamo representing themselves to be officials of the FBI and U.S. State Department." A previously released version of the same document had revealed the FBI impersonations, but the reference to the State Department had been redacted.

State Department spokesman Richard A. Boucher told reporters yesterday that he was unaware of the impersonation allegations. Another spokesman said the department does not employ interrogators or take part in interviews at Guantanamo Bay.

Another newly released document, dated January 2004, suggested that the FBI would "finally make an arrest" in connection with "interrogations in June 2003 when an FBI agent was impersonated." No such arrest has been publicly announced.

In several e-mails, FBI agents angrily complained about the impersonations and suggested that the ruse was aimed in part at avoiding blame for any subsequent public allegations of abuse.

The earlier documents also included e-mails from FBI agents who said they had witnessed Guantanamo Bay detainees being shackled to the floor for days at a time, deprived of food and water and left to defecate on themselves.