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Further Abuse

Editorial
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THE LATEST FBI documents detailing allegations of prisoner abuse at Guantanamo Bay are, like previous FBI documents, highly disturbing. They contain prisoners' descriptions of beatings, stripings and abuse of the Koran. Detainees variously claim the Muslim holy book has been thrown on the floor, thrown against a wall and, yes, flushed in a toilet. There are also references to these kinds of events having led to an "altercation" between detainees and guards.

But the status of these documents is nearly as disturbing as their content. They can be found, again like previous FBI documents, only on the Web site of the American Civil Liberties Union, which obtained them by suing the government under the Freedom of Information Act. They did not, in other words, appear in the context of a government or military investigation. After the ACLU released the documents Wednesday, Pentagon spokesman Lawrence T. Di Rita implied that such an investigation would be unnecessary, since these "fantastic charges about our guys doing something willfully heinous to a Koran for the purposes of rattling detainees are not credible on their face." But then, on Thursday, the commander of the Guantanamo facility, Brig. Gen. Jay W. Hood, acknowledged that incidents "broadly defined as mishandling of a Koran" had in fact taken place. Brig. Gen. Hood made this announcement following an investigation that he said had begun 12 days earlier -- which points to the deeper problem.

For the fact remains that although one has been promised, no independent military, Pentagon or other body has yet published an extensive investigation into the multiple accounts of prisoner abuse at Guantanamo Bay. There have been verbal descriptions of investigations and summaries of investigations, but no documents. One consequence is that much of the world believes the misbehavior has been worse, and more extensive, than what has been documented, and people know little or nothing of the corrective action that has been taken. In the case of the Koran, for example, most or all of the offenses appear to have occurred before January 2003, when the Pentagon responded to prisoner protests by issuing strict guidelines for handling the Koran.

If the administration really wanted to prevent the spread of unfounded rumors, and to convince people in this country and abroad that abuses no longer take place, then a public, written report should have been published months ago. The American public has a right to know what mistakes are being made in its name, as well as what improved procedures have been instituted in response.