

Outrage over Guantánamo abuse

Anti-US protests sweep Muslim world

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Anti-American protests over reports of US interrogators tormenting prisoners by desecrating the Koran spread throughout the Muslim world Friday. Angry demonstrations broke out from the Gaza Strip and the West Bank to Indonesia following four days of violent clashes in Afghanistan that have left over 16 people dead and scores wounded.

Protests were also reported in Egypt, Sudan and Pakistan. Meanwhile, the governments of Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and several other Muslim countries filed formal protests with Washington.

The immediate spark for the protests was a brief report in the May 9 issue of *Newsweek* magazine citing internal FBI memos from the US detention camp in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba reporting that “interrogators, attempting to rattle suspects ... had placed Korans on toilets and, in at least one case, flushed a holy book down the toilet.”

Some 520 detainees, virtually all of them Muslims from Afghanistan, Pakistan and a number of other countries, have been held incommunicado at Guantánamo—many of them for nearly three years—without being charged, much less tried. Cases of physical abuse and torture have been amply documented.

The impact of the report of the desecration of the Koran has been as severe in Muslim countries as the shocking pictures of Iraqi detainees suffering torture and sexual humiliation at the hands of US soldiers that came out of Iraq’s Abu Ghraib prison a little over a year ago.

In both Afghanistan and Pakistan, desecration of the Koran is an offense punishable by death.

Outrage over the grotesque affront to Islam has joined with simmering resentment over US militarism and social inequality and oppression. This is particularly true in Afghanistan, where the US-led occupation force of 18,000 troops props up a deeply unpopular puppet government.

The demonstrations in Afghanistan are the largest since the US invaded and occupied the country in 2001.

The protests began in Jalalabad, near the Pakistan border, a former stronghold of the Taliban government that was

ousted by the US invasion. They have since spread to the capital of Kabul, the provinces of Parwan and Kapisa in the north, Kandahar in the south, to the eastern provinces of Takhar and Lagham and to Logar and Khost in the southeast.

Demonstrators have attacked, looted and burned government buildings, police stations and United Nations offices as well as those of international relief organizations.

According to a report in *Asia Times*, “Many members of the police and the newly raised Afghan army showed sympathy for the demonstrators and were reluctant to use force against them when ordered to do so by their senior officers.”

In Jalalabad, the demonstrations began on Tuesday with some 2,000 students marching. By the next day, the crowds swelled to 10,000, attacking both US troops and Afghan security forces.

There were reports that US troops fired on the demonstrators, but the Pentagon claimed that they had fired into the air to disperse the crowd. In any event, four died on Wednesday in the city and at least 70 were wounded.

At least eight people were killed on Friday, the bloodiest day of demonstrations in Afghanistan. Three people were reported shot to death in the southeastern city of Ghazani, after a large crowd chanting “Death to America” attacked a police station and the governor’s residence.

Another three men were shot and killed in the northeastern town of Faizabad, where crowds set fire to offices of three foreign aid agencies.

Everywhere, the protests over the Koran incident were joined with demands for an end to the US occupation of Afghanistan. Demonstrators have chanted “death to America” and burned American flags.

The *New York Times* quoted a medical student, Layek Zakim, one of the hundreds demonstrating in Kabul: “The students are calling in one voice: we don’t want American bases in Afghanistan.”

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice tried to quell the anti-US sentiment by claiming that the Bush administration found desecration of the Koran “abhorrent.” Interrupting her

testimony before a Senate committee Thursday, she said she wanted to make a statement “directly to Muslims in America and throughout the world” on the reports from Guantánamo.

“Disrespect for the holy Koran is not now, nor has it ever been, nor will it ever be, tolerated by the United States,” she said. “We honor the sacred books of all the world’s great religions. Disrespect for the holy Koran is abhorrent to us all.”

While Rice claimed that the reports would be thoroughly investigated, the Pentagon appeared to dismiss the charges. General Richard Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, claimed that there was no evidence to support allegations that guards had thrown the Koran into a toilet at Guantánamo. He claimed, rather, that a detainee had done so. He went on to attribute the upheavals in Afghanistan to rival political factions.

The report in *Newsweek* was hardly unique, however. Attempts to demoralize and “break” detainees by attacking their religious beliefs have persisted throughout the “war on terrorism.”

In a recent interview with the Spanish daily *Diario de León*, a Moroccan who spent over two years in Guantánamo without every being charged described similar treatment. He said that US soldiers began using desecration of the Koran as a means of intimidating the detainees when he was first detained at the Bagram prison camp in Afghanistan.

“They grabbed the holy Koran, threw it on the floor, ripped it up, urinated on it and then threw it into the latrines,” he said. “We explained to the soldiers that this sacred book is not the terrorists’ but belongs to all Muslims. That was when I learned that the United States isn’t against terrorism, but against Islam.”

While he was beaten and subjected to physical abuse, he said the attacks on his religion were what affected him the most. “They stopped us from praying,” he said. “When there was a call to prayer, the Americans would laugh, sing and dance.”

One of the key senior officers in charge of crafting policies for interrogations and for military guards who are charged with creating conditions for what the Pentagon refers to as the “successful exploitation of detainees” is Lt. Gen. William Boykin.

Boykin, the deputy undersecretary of defense for intelligence, gained international notoriety for delivering speeches to both military and church audiences referring to the US military as a “Christian army” and casting the “war on terrorism” as a religious war between Christianity and Islam. Describing his confrontation with a Muslim militia leader in Somalia, Boykin declared that he was confident because “my God was a real god and his was an idol.”

Despite the outrage over Boykin’s statements, the

administration failed to discipline him or move him from his sensitive command. His views, of course, are consistent with those of the Republican Party’s base within the right-wing Christian fundamentalist camp, and his practices as evidenced at Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo enjoy the support of the chief sadists in the White House and the Pentagon.

It is evident that the US abuse of the predominantly Muslim detainees based upon their religion—like other methods of torture—is not a matter of a few “rogue” soldiers. This is a policy that has been set at the top, all the way up to the Bush White House and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld.

Among those confirming that the torture and abuse in the US detention facilities was a matter of Pentagon policy is Colonel Janis Karpinski, the Army reserve officer who was demoted from the rank of brigadier general over the Abu Ghraib scandal.

In an interview with the ABC television news program “Nightline” Thursday, she charged that General Geoffrey Miller, who came to Abu Ghraib prison in August 2003 after commanding the detention camp at Guantánamo, introduced the methods exposed by the photographs that came out of the Iraqi jail.

According to Pentagon sources, Miller was sent to Iraq to “Gitmoize” the Iraqi detention centers, introducing brutal and perverse methods in an attempt to extract more intelligence on the Iraqi resistance.

Referring to the stacking of naked detainees in pyramids and dragging them by dog leashes, Karpinski said, “I can tell you with certainty that the MPs [military police] certainly did not design those techniques. They certainly did not come to Abu Ghraib or to Iraq with dog collars and dog leashes.”

She added, “I believe that Gen. Miller gave them the ideas and gave them the instructions on what techniques to use.”

Asked if Rumsfeld was aware of the methods being used at Abu Ghraib, Karpinski replied, “Well, absolutely. And I would say that it is consistent with his direction of the military.”



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