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Gen.: Interrogation may have violated Geneva Conventions

BY ANNE Q. HOY
WASHINGTON BUREAU

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WASHINGTON -- One of President George W. Bush's chief military advisers Thursday suggested at least one of the interrogation techniques authorized for use in Iraq would violate the Geneva Conventions.

In a blunt exchange between a Democratic senator and the nation's No. 2 general, Gen. Peter Pace said that if an American were required to squat, bag over head, arms extended upward, naked in cell block for 45 minutes it would breach the Geneva Conventions governing the treatment of prisoners in times of war.

The response came during a Senate Armed Service Committee hearing examining Bush's request for a fresh \$25-billion "contingency fund" for military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan beginning Oct. 1 -- something that drew sharp complaints from senators of both parties for its lack of specificity and weak oversight mechanisms.

Further, it came just one day after Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld defended the interrogation methods, saying they were vetted by Pentagon lawyers and in line with the international convention. It marked the second time in recent days that a top Pentagon civilian has clashed with a top military leader.

Sen. Jack Reed (D-R.I.), a West Point graduate who served in the Army, pressed Pace and Paul Wolfowitz, deputy defense secretary, to declare the practice as either a good technique or a violation of rules.

"I would describe it as a violation, sir," Pace said, noting that his conclusion would stand even if a high-ranking officer approved such steps.

After several rounds of similar questioning, Wolfowitz proclaimed "not humane" the practice of forcing a prisoner to crouch naked for 45 minutes or forcing him to stand with a bag over his head for 72 hours. Such practices represented the implementation of guidelines that Reed said Lt. Gen. Ricardo Sanchez, commander of U.S. troops in Iraq, authorized for use, with approval, for Iraqi detainees.

A top Pentagon official earlier this week said such practices were authorized but no one in the field ever made a request to use any of them.

Drawing the ire of two Democrats, Wolfowitz and Pace said they were unaware of the techniques.

At issue was a sheet outlining interrogation guidelines for Iraqis detained by American forces that was disclosed by the Pentagon to the Senate Armed Service panel earlier this week.

The sheet, entitled "Interrogation Rules of Engagement," lists two sets of interrogation methods, those approved for all detainees and those reserved for higher-target prisoners -- the latter methods required Sanchez's written approval. Listed under that heading were such things as the presence of "military working dogs," "sensory deprivation" for no longer than 72 hours and "stress positions" for no more than 45 hours.

Sen. Carl Levin (D-Mich.) said such actions were clear violations of the international rules and blasted Wolfowitz for not having been apprised of them. Reed said Wolfowitz was "dissembling."

Pouncing on the word "engagement" in the guideline's title, Levin stressed that in

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military-speak it means "force." "The title of that document seems to me to dramatically say it all," Levin said, adding that not knowing about the document "dramatizes the failure of leadership here."

Wolfowitz started to defend the practices, noting that officials were instructed in the same document to treat prisoners always in a "humane and lawful" manner.

Reed, visibly annoyed, jumped back in and demanded that Wolfowitz say whether forcing a prisoner to assume either of the interrogation positions would be inhumane. "It's not humane," Wolfowitz said, but said he did not know what the terms on the guidelines meant.

Meanwhile, The Associated Press reported that a U.S. diplomatic official in Iraq told the family of slain American Nicholas Berg in early April that he was being detained by the U.S. military, according to e-mails provided by the family Thursday.

U.S. government officials have said Berg, who was found beheaded in Baghdad, was never in the custody of American forces.

But an e-mail from Beth A. Payne, the U.S. consular officer in Iraq, to Berg's father, Michael, said: "I have confirmed that your son, Nick, is being detained by the U.S. military in Mosul. He is safe. He was picked up approximately one week ago."

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