

# Human Rights Watch

## Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

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How did a short item in *Newsweek* reporting that U.S. interrogators had desecrated a Koran at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, spark massive riots in several Muslim countries last week, leading to the deaths of least 16 people? And who, exactly, should bear the blame for these tragic events?

Certainly not *Newsweek*. The magazine eventually retracted and apologized for its story because it could not properly defend the particular point it had made that the United States was investigating claims of desecration of the Koran at Guantanamo. But the central claim about desecration which is what set off the riots - remains very much alive.

For more than two years before the magazine ran its story, newspapers in the United States, Britain and throughout the Muslim world published interviews in which detainees held by the United States at Guantanamo, in Afghanistan and in Iraq claimed that their guards and interrogators had denigrated Islamic religious symbols and, in particular, desecrated copies of the Koran by kicking them across the floor, tearing out pages and tossing them into toilets. Several former detainees held by U.S. forces in Afghanistan told Human Rights Watch how prisoners at the U.S. air base in Kandahar protested after a guard allegedly kicked a copy of the Koran while searching a cell.

In recent days, *Newsweek* has drawn more fire than the parties who actually set the stage for the riots. The spark came on May 6 when Imran Khan, a Pakistani politician who rose to fame as a cricket star, brandished a copy of *Newsweek* at a news conference and highlighted the claims about the desecration of the Koran.

As protesters took to the streets in Pakistani cities, politicians across the border in Afghanistan whipped up public ire as well. Politicians saw these claims as a perfect opportunity to score points against Presidents Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan and President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan, both strong allies of the United States.

As anti-U.S. riots erupted, the Bush administration seized upon *Newsweek's* lapse in journalistic practice as a cover. When *Newsweek* said it had relied on a single Pentagon source who later said he could not substantiate his claims, the White House and the Pentagon swiftly took advantage of the error to browbeat the press and deflect attention from the broader stream of reports on U.S. abuse of detainees that have been surfacing since long before the Abu Ghraib prison scandal.

It's the Bush administration, not *Newsweek*, that bears responsibility for policies that have sullied the reputation of United States in the Muslim world and beyond. It is difficult to imagine that the anti-U.S. riots that took place last week would have been so virulent if the *Newsweek* article hadn't appeared against a backdrop of abuses in U.S.-run detention sites. Outrage about American abuses was and remains a tinderbox.

Hundreds of allegations have been made about abuses of detainees by U.S. forces, including more than 40 deaths in detention facilities. But so far the United States has not permitted a serious independent and credible investigation of abuses at its detention facilities. The real source of outrage is the United States' failure to properly investigate, much less address, such claims after years of consistent reports.

The Bush administration has not even answered numerous allegations that U.S. interrogators desecrated the Koran at Guantanamo and elsewhere, nor has it accepted any responsibility for the understandable anger that these allegations have inspired. Instead, the White House spokesman, Scott McClellan has called on *Newsweek* to do more to "to help repair the damage that has been done."

It's the White House that should do more. The Bush administration should immediately announce an end to its practice of allowing "cruel, inhumane and degrading" treatment of U.S.-held detainees. The administration should allow a special prosecutor to lead a genuinely independent criminal investigation into all alleged detention abuses by U.S. personnel abroad, including military, CIA and private contractors. And the probe should focus on senior military and civilian officials whose actions or omissions contributed to the abuse, not just the grunts who carried it out.

One of the dangerous results of the now tarnished image of the United States is that it plays into the hands of politicians who stoke religious anger in the Muslim world. They have used accounts of U.S. detainee abuse, as well as the single *Newsweek* story, to foment

discord against governments allied with the United States. These figures, and not Newsweek, should be held responsible for their inciting religious violence resulting in the deaths of civilians.

Even as the furor fades, the specter of self-censorship weighs heavily on the U.S. press. Journalists are now under intense pressure to avoid reporting other items about abuses in detention that might incur the wrath of the White House, or be used by as kindling by radical politicians in the Muslim world. The silence of a free press about the U.S. record of detention abuses, and how this abuse has hurt America's standing abroad, would be yet another tragedy to add to the lives lost in the riots.

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