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Powell says Bush was 'informed' of Red Cross concerns

Officials advised president 'in general terms' about reports of abuse, he says

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WASHINGTON - Secretary of State Colin L. Powell said yesterday that he and other top officials kept President Bush "fully informed ... in general terms" about complaints made by the Red Cross and others over ill-treatment of detainees in U.S. custody.

Powell's statement suggests Bush may have known earlier than the White House has acknowledged about complaints raised by the International Committee of the Red Cross and human rights groups regarding abuse of detainees in Iraq.

"We kept the president informed of the concerns that were raised by the ICRC and other international organizations as part of my regular briefings of the president, and advised him that we had to follow these issues, and when we got notes sent to us or reports sent to us ... we had to respond to them, and the president certainly made it clear that that's what he expected us to do," Powell said.

Powell said that he, national security adviser Condoleezza Rice and Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld kept Bush "fully informed of the concerns that were being expressed, not in specific details, but in general terms."

White House spokesman Scott McClellan said last week that the president was first informed about the abuse of detainees in Iraq by Rumsfeld, who "let the president know that there were allegations of prisoner abuse in Iraq and that the military was taking action to address it."

McClellan did not give a precise date, but Rumsfeld, testifying before Congress, said he told the president in late January or early February about an investigation being conducted by Maj. Gen. Antonio M. Taguba into alleged abuse at the Abu Ghraib prison, the main U.S. detention facility in Iraq.

Bush has said he did not see the graphic pictures of the abuse until they were broadcast on television.

Powell, in his comments yesterday, appeared to be trying to show that he and his department did not ignore or minimize early reports of the abuse when they began to surface last year.

Red Cross officials have said that they began complaining about the condition of Iraqi prisoners more than a year ago, before major combat ended, and that they raised concerns about Abu Ghraib in October, more than two months before Taguba launched his investigation on orders from Lt. Gen. Ricardo S. Sanchez, the senior U.S. military commander in Iraq.



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Army Maj. Gen. Antonio M. Taguba is sworn (AP/Dennis Cook)

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A Powell aide said he couldn't pinpoint when the secretary first spoke with Bush about detainees in Iraq but said Powell told the president of receiving complaints about detainees generally - in Iraq, Afghanistan and Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, "at various times throughout this period - the last year or more."

Powell met with Jakob Kellenberger, president of the International Committee of the Red Cross, in January 2003 before the Iraq war; on May 27, 2003, after Bush declared the end of major combat in Iraq; and in mid-January this year.

Speaking to reporters outside the State Department yesterday, Powell said that at each of his meetings with Kellenberger, "I expressed our support for the work of the ICRC, and he reported to me on his work with respect to our detention facilities, and we talked about our detention facilities in Guantanamo, some of our detention facilities in Afghanistan and our detention facilities in Iraq."

"He reported to me on the findings of the various inspections," Powell said, adding: "The information that I received from the ICRC is the same information that the Pentagon received from the ICRC, or Ambassador Bremer and the command in Baghdad received from the ICRC. In fact, they got it before we did." L. Paul Bremer III is the top U.S. administrator in Iraq.

At the Jan. 15 meeting, Kellenberger told Powell, "We have serious concerns about detainees in Iraq," although he did not detail them, a senior State Department official said. The next month, the Red Cross summarized its previous findings in a harsh 24-page confidential critique of abuses against Iraqi detainees between March and November 2003, calling some of them "tantamount to torture."

The report described an inspection of the Abu Ghraib prison in mid-October in which Red Cross officials witnessed detainees who were undergoing interrogation being kept "completely naked in totally empty cells and in total darkness." A military intelligence officer said this practice was "part of the process."

The Red Cross reported that as punishment, detainees were made to walk in the corridors naked or with women's underwear on their heads. It also complained of "brutality" against detainees, "sometimes causing death or serious injury."

During his January visit to Washington, Kellenberger met not only with Powell but also with Rice and, reportedly, with Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz. A White House spokesman, Sean McCormack, said that "Iraq was not mentioned" in Kellenberger's meeting with Rice. The bulk of the meeting, he said, involved Guantanamo Bay, the U.S.-run detention facility in Cuba. Attempts to reach a spokesman for Wolfowitz were unsuccessful.

McCormack said Rice was informed about the same time as Bush of the abuses at Abu Ghraib that have caused a worldwide furor and prompted apologies from the president and other top officials. He said he did not know when Rice was told more generally about complaints involving the treatment of detainees in Iraq.

Powell has made no secret of the problems the prison-abuse scandal has caused for U.S. foreign policy. In an interview on National Public Radio yesterday, he said the scandal had given the United States a "black eye."

"It's a disaster for us to be seen conducting these kinds of terrible acts against people who we were responsible for," he said.

In addition to complaints from the Red Cross, Amnesty International complained to U.S. occupation authorities last summer about alleged ill-treatment of prisoners.

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