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Video of Marines urinating on bodies no surprise, Afghans say

By Nancy A. Youssef

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WASHINGTON - The Pentagon scrambled Thursday to assure Afghans that it would aggressively investigate a video that shows U.S. Marines urinating on three corpses, while Afghans' reaction varied from outrage to resignation that the video merely reflected behavior that they think is typical of American troops.

Pentagon officials said the video appeared authentic and that they'd confirmed the identities of two of the four Marines shown in it.

In Afghanistan, while no major protests were reported the day after the video surfaced online — purporting to show four Marines standing in a semicircle and urinating on dead Afghans — one resident said he wasn't surprised.

"I know a lot of horrible things happen in the south and nobody but the locals know about it," said Jamal Karimi, 32, referring to southern Afghanistan, where American forces have maintained a large troop presence.

"Such things happen all the time, and people talk about it but media hardly report them," said Karimi, a shopkeeper from the southern city of Kandahar.

In Washington, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta called Afghan President Hamid Karzai about the video, calling it "utterly deplorable." The commandant of the Marine Corps and the secretary

of the Navy used similar language to express disgust over what would be the latest example of U.S. troops treating those killed or captured on the battlefield as trophies.

Karzai said, "This act by American soldiers is completely inhumane and condemnable in the strongest possible terms. We expressly ask the U.S. government to urgently investigate the video and apply the most severe punishment to anyone found guilty in this crime."

Pentagon officials said the incident was being investigated but they confirmed that the troops were members of Team 4, 3rd Battalion, 2nd Marines, out of Camp Lejeune, N.C., which was deployed in southern Afghanistan's Helmand province from last March to August. The Marines' identities weren't immediately revealed.

White House Press Secretary Jay Carney said the behavior the video apparently depicted was "deplorable, reprehensible and unacceptable." He said he didn't know whether President Barack Obama had seen the video, but that "he is certainly aware of it and shares in the sentiment expressed by Secretary Panetta."

The Taliban released a statement of condemnation but said they wouldn't impede U.S. efforts to begin peace talks with them because the video showed just a "small percentage of the invaders' atrocities."

Sermons after prayers Friday could ignite more impassioned and violent reactions, as many Afghans will gather in large numbers for the first time and religious leaders might discuss the video.

Afghans have been spurred by Friday sermons in the past to react to incidents days after they occurred. Last year, Afghans took to the streets nearly a week after a Florida pastor vowed to burn copies of the Quran. In a riot in the usually placid northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif, seven foreigners working for the United Nations were killed.

In the United States, advocacy groups said Afghans' muted initial reaction was likely because they'd not only come to think that American troops commonly behaved this way, but also were largely skeptical about the United States' commitment to punishing such abuses. The words of high-level officials have little impact because, residents say, they've watched as egregious incidents over the last decade of war often have resulted in charges dropped against offending U.S. troops and commanders, or never filed.

"The lack of accountability suggests a culture of impunity, particularly the failure to charge high-level commanders and officials, both civilian and military," said Andrea Prasow, a senior counter-terrorism counselor at Human Rights Watch.

In the video, one Marine says, "Have a good day, buddy," as he urinates on an Afghan. Another says, "Golden like a shower."

In the past, there've been videos of U.S. helicopter pilots laughing as they shot at civilians who were carrying an injured man to a van in Baghdad. U.S. troops have photographed themselves smiling while posing next to dead Afghans and Iraqis.

Only recently has the military begun aggressively charging soldiers for such actions. The Army is investigating allegations of a "kill team" in Afghanistan composed of members of the 5th Stryker brigade, 2nd Infantry Division, that targeted unarmed Afghans and cut off their fingers as war trophies while deployed in southern Afghanistan in late 2009 and early 2010.

So far, 11 soldiers have been convicted in connection with the deaths of the Afghans.

But no high-level commander or civilian has been convicted of crimes against Afghans and Iraqis.

In the case of abuses of prisoners in Abu Ghraib, Iraq, the brigadier general in charge of the prison was demoted by one rank to colonel. Two of the 11 soldiers charged were sentenced to 10 years in prison, while the others received lesser sentences.

After U.S. Marines killed 24 Iraqi civilians in the town of Haditha, the military eventually dropped charges against all but one of the troops involved. In a statement, Marine then-Lt. Gen. James Mattis cited the fog of war and the difficulties of fighting a counterinsurgency campaign to explain the Marines' decision, after explosives struck them, to enter several homes in the town and kill everyone inside.

The Marines were "fighting a shadowy enemy who hides among the innocent people, does not comply with any aspect of the law of war and routinely targets and intentionally draws fire toward civilians," Mattis wrote in 2007. He's now the commander of U.S. Central Command, which has responsibility for Iraq and Afghanistan, among other countries.

Marine Corps officials said the service members involved in the latest incident could face charges. James F. Amos, the Marine Corps commandant, said he'd ordered a probe by the Naval Criminal Investigative Service to begin immediately.

Ray Mabus, the secretary of the Navy, said in a statement that "anyone who is found responsible for these actions will be held appropriately and fully accountable." It was unclear how far up the chain of command charges might be filed. The Geneva Conventions outlaw desecrating bodies on the battlefield.

Advocates noted the coincidence of the video's release Wednesday, the 10th anniversary of the opening of the controversial U.S. military prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

"I think it is ironic because Guantanamo represents lawlessness," Prasow said. "The response now (by the U.S. military) will be telling."