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Al Jazeera

US apologizes for Afghan 'Quran incident'

Incident called "deeply unfortunate" and military leaders order probe after reports of Muslim holy book burning.

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NATO says the decision to dispose the texts was a mistake, but denies that copies of the Quran were burned [Reuters]

The US has apologised for inappropriate treatment of religious material in Afghanistan, after hundreds of angry Afghans protested over reports that US forces burned copies of the Quran.

Leon Panetta, the US secretary of defence, called the incident "deeply unfortunate" in remarks on Tuesday. He echoed his top commander General John Allen's call for "swift and decisive action to investigate this matter".

"These actions do not represent the views of the United States military. We honour and respect the religious practices of the Afghan people, without exception," he said.

Hundreds of protesters earlier besieged the Bagram airbase, about 60Km north of the capital Kabul, chanting calls of "death to America," and firing slingshots and petrol bombs at the gate of the base.

Allen, who is the American commander of NATO forces in Afghanistan, offered his apology and ordered an investigation into the incident.

Guards at the base responded by firing rubber bullets from a watchtower, an AFP news agency photographer said.

Another protest by about 500 people broke out in the Pul-e-Charkhi district of Kabul, not far from major NATO bases on the Jalalabad road, Ashamat Estanakzai, an Afghan police spokesman, told AFP.

Al Jazeera's Bernard Smith, reporting from the city of Herat, said: "We don't know if the religious literature was burned, but we know that it was due to be burned because waste at the base is burned generally.

"We do know it was being thrown out. That is what's caused the protests outside Bagram, about 800-1,000 people were protesting there.

Investigation launched

Carsten Jacobson, a spokesman for the NATO-led international force in Afghanistan, said an investigation had been launched into the issue and preliminary information showed that Quran copies had not been burned.

"What actually happened was that in the course of last night, considerable amount of religious material, including Qurans, was set for disposal by ISAF personel," he told Al Jazeera from Kabul.

"Fortunately for all of us, local workers recognised the type of material and intervened. Actually the disposal process was stopped in time but it led to protests over the day. As far as we know, and the investigations are ongoing, they were not burned. But we have to wait for the results."

Announcing the investigation into the reports of Quran burning, Allen, the US commander, said: "I offer my sincere apologies for any offence this may have caused, to the President of Afghanistan, the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, and most importantly, to the noble people of Afghanistan," he said.

Allen's remarkably candid statement, apparently aimed at damage limitation after similar incidents led to violence and attacks on foreigners, was played repeatedly on Afghan television.

"We are thoroughly investigating the incident and are taking steps to ensure this does not ever happen again," Allen said.

Allegations that NATO troops working inside the base had set fire to copies of the Quran were first reported by a senior government official.

"It is surprising that after all these years American and NATO forces have been here in Afghanistan and all the lessons they have learned about how important it is to treat Islamic material with due respect, this sort of thing is still happening," our correspondent said.

"That is what causes so much offence here in Afghanistan and adds fuel to the anti-American and anti-foreigner feelings."

Similar protests have in the past turned violent in Afghanistan, an extremely devout Islamic nation where an insult to the religion carries the death penalty.

Some 10 people were killed and dozens of others were injured during **days of unrest caused last April over the burning of a** copy of the Quran by an American pastor, Terry Jones, in Florida.