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Activists Question Speed of Military Rape Reforms; Lawmakers and Victim Advocates Say Long-Term Goals are Good but the Resources Available to Female Soldiers Now may not be Enough

By Miles Moffeit, *Denver Post* Staff Writer

[Washington, DC] – Six months after Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld ordered a task force to help U.S. troops raped in the Iraq combat theater, lawmakers and victim-rights organizations question whether emergency assistance and supplies have sufficiently improved.

While the task force's findings have helped spur legislation to broadly change the way the military addresses the handling of sex-assault cases over the long term, Army personnel still do not have access to victim advocates in the war zone. And questions remain regarding the number of medical, counseling and forensic personnel available to respond to assaults.

Late last week, 48 members of Congress sent a letter to Rumsfeld demanding more answers and more support for victims and "not summits," referring to a key task force recommendation calling for a high-level gathering of commanders to mete out policy initiatives.

The task force report, released in early May, found glaring problems in the handling of sex-assault cases by military commands, ranging from poor support services for women to command interference in prosecutions. But the report came under fire for not delivering concrete solutions, including emergency measures for helping female troops now.

"Here's the situation: Our servicewomen in Iraq continue to make reports of sexual assaults, and DOD puts out a report that talks about convening summits and developing policies," Rep. Carolyn Maloney, D-N.Y., said in a statement Friday. "They (victims) need confidentiality in reporting. They need DNA evidence kits available and trained personnel to administer them. They need to know that if they report an assault, they will not be put through the ringer by the military and possibly kicked out. And they need these things now."

Meanwhile, the tally of female soldiers seeking assistance from civilian agencies for sex assaults by fellow service members nears 200. And civilian advocates and counselors from across the country are meeting in Denver this week – at the 11th annual conference

of the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence – in part to discuss the military’s problems.

“Alarming, there still is not sufficient medical attention (and supplies) for victims,” said Christine Hansen, executive director of the Connecticut-based Miles Foundation. Hansen will speak at the conference today.

Department of Defense officials said they were unable to respond to a reporter’s questions concerning the implementation of reforms late last week.

In recent weeks, a slew of legislative initiatives addressing sexual assault have won early approval by both chambers of Congress after hearings conducted by both armed services committees and the women’s caucus. Among the measures are mandates to create standardized policies for prevention and care of victims to requiring reviews of military law that would modernize the statute defining rape. Most of the bills await review by conference committees.

While Congress members and national advocacy organizations applaud long-term solutions, many are alarmed that military leaders have been unable to explain whether medical and forensic treatment have improved for female soldiers who have been assaulted in the Iraqi theater.

Although Rumsfeld’s task force expressed urgency at exposing flaws in operations, the final report offered no details about current staffing levels or supplies in the Iraq war. It also failed to deliver any recommendations to make emergency changes, such as immediately providing advocates who help victims obtain counseling, legal guidance and safety support such as restraining orders.

Although some accused soldiers have been separated from victims in recent months, according to advocates with knowledge of problems, little else has changed in the battlefield.

Pentagon officials, responding to recent questions from Rep. Loretta Sanchez, D-Calif., and other lawmakers, said about 100 rape kits, used for collecting DNA evidence, are available in Iraq. Advocacy organizations say that’s too few given that thousands of women are serving in the armed forces.

“Given the large area, that number just isn’t feasible,” said Hansen, who will outline various flaws today in the military’s response to sexual assault victims at the Denver conference. Aside from a lack of kits, many victims have reported that their commands have not made transportation available to combat-zone hospitals where the evidence kits are administered, Hansen said.

Sanchez and Maloney said they have been dismayed by the Pentagon’s lack of response, including its failure to provide specifics about what services are available. Although Sanchez has repeatedly asked how many rape-crisis counselors are in the field, she said

no answer has been provided. A recent letter shows that Defense officials told her that many counselors in the theater are not specifically rape-trauma counselors, but some are “trained in that area.”

“Their response really got to me: What does that mean exactly? I mean, do they have them, or do they not?” Sanchez said.

Maloney said Congress must keep putting pressure on the military in order to see action: “DOD has a history of ignoring recommendations that were made in numerous previous reports on sexual assault. ... We want to make sure that doesn’t happen again.”

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