

# ***WASHINGTON POST***

Wednesday, March 10, 2004; Page A03

## **Air Force to Study Rape Complaints**

### ***Major Inquiry to Focus on Handling of Cases***

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The Air Force has ordered a major study of how the service handles allegations of rape and other sexual assaults, in the wake of a report by the Air Force's Pacific Forces command that noted flaws in the response to 92 rape cases between 2001 and 2003, Pentagon officials said yesterday.

The Pacific Forces report, inspired by the revelation last summer of poor treatment of rape victims at the Air Force Academy in Colorado, noted that data on sexual assaults were not carefully collected and that some victims were not offered adequate and continuous support. It did not cite deficiencies in prosecution, as was alleged at the academy.

The tally of 34 rape accusations in 2001, 17 in 2002 and 41 in 2003 is "not a promising picture," Air Force Gen. William J. Begert, the Pacific Forces commander, said in a private briefing last month for top Air Force officers and civilian officials, according to a summary of his presentation released by the service yesterday. The allegations were first reported in the New York Times.

"One cannot read the kinds of reports you're referring to and not have a deep concern about the armed forces, because we do hold ourselves to a higher standard," Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld said yesterday at a news briefing.

The report covered a total of 103 Air Force personnel and three dependents accused of rape at Hickam Air Force Base in Hawaii -- the Pacific Forces command's headquarters - - and at bases in South Korea, Guam, Japan, Singapore, Alaska and Diego Garcia. Its conclusions were first reported by the Gazette of Colorado Springs.

Begert said a study team run by his judge advocate's office had encountered "significant data collection problems" while conducting the survey. The team deliberately excluded lesser sexual offenses, such as sodomy and indecent assaults, because no reliable, comprehensive data for such offenses existed. "That is part of the problem," said Col. Steve Lepper, the staff judge advocate.

Begert said the study also found that, in many instances, victims were shuttled from one office to another as their cases proceeded toward a formal hearing and trial, instead of being put in touch with a team of officials that included treatment specialists. "This is unacceptable," Begert said. He also warned that the Air Force "must avoid dropping victims" after deciding not to prosecute the assailants, noting that they may still need treatment.

The study revealed that fewer of the Air Force rape cases involved the use of physical force or weapons than is typical in the civilian population, Lepper said. Most of the Air Force victims were younger than 25 and were voluntarily present at the locations where the rapes occurred. Alcohol was a factor in more than 60 percent of the encounters.

On Feb. 24, after being briefed on the report, Air Force Gen. T. Michael Moseley, the vice chief of staff, ordered the nine Air Force commands worldwide to prepare an even more exhaustive survey of their sexual assault response programs. He said the service's aim is to "eliminate sexual assault and the climate that fosters it."

In the meantime, Begert demanded the implementation of a nine-point plan to improve his command's response, including separate briefings to male and female personnel when they arrive in the region and required, centralized reporting of all sexual assault cases.

Kate Summers, director of services at the Miles Foundation in Connecticut -- a nonprofit organization that says it has helped treat thousands of assault victims in the military -- said Begert's office had briefed her. "I think the general should be applauded," she said.

But she noted that some Air Force policies will continue to hinder the adequate reporting and treatment of assault cases, including what she described as the service's ban on the confidential reporting of assaults and its refusal to offer victims a choice of whether to pursue charges.

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