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Military Scolded on Assaults

Senators Seek More Protection for Female Soldiers

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Alarmed by reports of sexual assaults on dozens of female U.S. service members in the Persian Gulf region, senators admonished the Pentagon yesterday to do more to halt the attacks and to improve treatment for the victims.

Appearing before a panel of the Senate Armed Services Committee, a group of senior Pentagon officials acknowledged that significant shortcomings remained in the handling of sexual assault cases but insisted progress had been made and more improvements were on the way.

As evidence of progress, the Pentagon released a survey showing a drop in the number of those polled reporting sexual assault, from 6 percent in 1995 to 3 percent in 2002. The survey, based on responses from 20,000 service members across the armed forces, also found a decline in other offensive sexual conduct, including crude jokes and unwanted attention. And it reported higher ratings of military leaders for trying to stop sexual harassment.

But the senators made it clear they were not satisfied either with the level of misconduct that persists or existing measures for treating victims of assault.

Sen. Saxby Chambliss (R-Ga.), chairman of the personnel subcommittee, called the percentage of sexual assaults suffered by women in uniform “shocking” and labeled some of the recent allegations “very frightening.”

Sen. Susan Collins (R-Maine) declared that female U.S. soldiers in the field sometimes have “more to fear from fellow soldiers than from the enemy.”

“I’m concerned because I don’t feel a sense of outrage by military leadership, not at this point at least,” added Sen. Ben Nelson (D-Neb.)

And Sen. John W. Warner (R-Va.), who chairs the full committee, wondered out loud why it took the Pentagon nearly two years to release the results of a survey done in the first four months of 2002.

“This committee is prepared to back the U.S. military to achieve zero tolerance” of sexual abuse incidents, Warner said. But, he warned, “if you don’t carry it out, we’re going to take over.”

Earlier this month, Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld ordered a high-level review of the handling of reports of sexual assaults and the care provided victims, particularly in cases arising from overseas deployments to combat zones. The review is being conducted by a 10-member task force from the military services and the Pentagon’s Joint Staff, with a report due in May. The Army and Air Force have launched their own investigations.

The moves came in the wake of 112 reported sexual misconduct cases over the past two years in the U.S. Central Command area of operations, which includes Iraq, Kuwait and Afghanistan.

In testimony yesterday, David Chu, the civilian head of the Pentagon’s personnel and readiness office, conceded that the assault rate against female troops was “still too high” and that the Pentagon has “a long way to go” in addressing the problem.

But he and the vice chiefs of the four military services, who also appeared before the subcommittee, said they took the matter seriously and were intently reviewing what more could be done.

“As we work to rid our corps of these vile acts, every victim is a wounded comrade, one who will be treated with respect and dignity and one who will not be left behind,” said Gen. William Nyland, assistant Marine Corps commandant.

Pressed on whether commanders should be given less latitude in how they handle sexual misconduct cases, the military officers defended the wide discretion currently allowed. They said they welcomed any review of the Uniform Code of Military Justice that would facilitate the criminal prosecution of misconduct cases, but they offered no specific changes in the code.

Chu said the Pentagon review underway would probably lead to increased assistance for the victims of assaults and to redoubled efforts at prevention. He noted that much of the misconduct appears concentrated in the most junior ranks, involving young troops who have not been as exposed to training programs aimed at curbing sexual offenses.

Chambliss expressed particular concern at the absence of a policy preventing the victim of an assault and the accused assailant from coming back into contact with each other, citing a case where a woman was put back in the unit with the man she said had attacked her. The senator also complained that investigations of assault allegations, particular those involving deployed troops, were taking too long.

“Everything takes longer in theater,” said Gen. George Casey, the Army’s vice chief, adding that Army authorities are looking at how to speed up action in misconduct cases.

Chambliss said he wanted the Pentagon review to lead to stronger written policies and a standardization of procedures across the services for treating victims and protecting them from retribution for reporting misconduct.

“The main thing we expect is enforcement,” Chambliss said. “There obviously have been situations where the policies in every branch of the service have not been enforced.”

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