

Pentagon to Tell Congress How Rape Cases are Handled

By Tara Copp

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(Washington, D.C.) The Senate Armed Services Committee will hear from Pentagon leaders next week on what they are doing to address a growing number of reports of rape by military personnel in Iraq and at bases nationwide.

At least 37 women have reported they were attacked by fellow soldiers in Iraq, and earlier this month, a new sexual assault reporting scandal broke out at Sheppard Air Force Base in Texas, when it was reported that at least two-dozen women have said they were attacked between 2002 and 2003. In 2003, reports that sexual assaults on women at the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Colo., went unpunished and led to the removal of several of the top officers there.

The high-level hearing on Wednesday, Feb. 25, will include the vice chiefs of the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marines; rape prevention counselors within the military; and the executive director for the National Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence.

“We’ll look at the overarching (Defense Department) policy,” said Lt. Cmdr. Jane Campbell, a Pentagon spokeswoman. Sheppard’s recent controversy “may come up and may be addressed,” she said, but “specific allegations at a particular base” did not lead to the hearing.

Last week, the Pentagon appointed a task force to look into how its officers respond when a soldier seeks help after a sexual assault. This week, a team of 15 investigators went to Sheppard to interview the personnel involved in the base’s rape prevention programs.

At Wednesday’s hearing, the witnesses and senators will be looking at the “policies and programs for preventing and responding to incidents of sexual assault,” according to a press release on the hearing from Sen. Saxby Chambliss, R-GA, the subcommittee’s chairman.

Air Force spokesman Lt. Col. Mike Caldwell said that beyond the Senate hearing, “the issue has been a major topic during recent meetings of top Air Force leadership.”

“Air Force major command leadership will continue to be aggressive in determining the magnitude of any problems,” Caldwell said. The branch is “assessing programs and policies in place to deal with each and every case, developing other initiatives to ensure that any incidents are handled appropriately, and that all commanders are aware of the importance we place on this area of Air Force life,” he said.

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