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By Miles Moffeit and Amy Herdy, *Denver Post* Staff Writers

betrayal in the ranks

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Rumsfeld Orders Military Inquiry into Sex Assaults

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, responding to growing congressional pressure, has ordered an investigation into the military's handling of sexual assault cases, saying he is especially concerned about recent reports of female troops in the Iraq war being attacked by fellow soldiers.

In a memorandum released to The Denver Post on Friday, Rumsfeld instructed Undersecretary David Chu, who manages military personnel issues, to review how the armed services treat victims and to respond with findings and recommendations within 90 days.

Pentagon officials also said Friday that at least 88 cases of sexual misconduct have been reported by troops in Iraq, Kuwait and Afghanistan.

"I am concerned about recent reports regarding allegations of sexual assaults on service members deployed in Iraq and Kuwait," Rumsfeld said in the memo dated Thursday. "Commanders at every level have a duty to take appropriate steps to prevent sexual assaults, protect victims and hold those who commit offenses accountable.

"We are responsible for ensuring that the victims of sexual assault are properly treated."

Rumsfeld's directive follows recent calls by Congress - primarily members of the women's caucus - for the Pentagon to respond to issues raised in a series of Post investigative stories about how the military addresses sexual and domestic violence. In November, the newspaper published stories documenting flawed victim services and leniency for sex offenders under the military justice system, which allows commanders to decide whether soldiers are prosecuted.

"What he says sounds good, and we expected it - but we want to see action," said U.S. Rep. Louise Slaughter, D-N.Y. "As with the Air Force Academy, we're concerned that we were told things were being fixed, but as time went on it's clear that they weren't."

Congressional hearings sought

In late January, The Post reported that at least 37 female soldiers serving in the Iraq war had sought help for sexual trauma from civilian rape organizations after returning to the U.S. Those women reported poor medical services and inadequate investigations by commanders. Within days, Slaughter and dozens of other congresswomen pledged to conduct public hearings on those issues and the larger patterns detailed in the newspaper's original investigative reports. As of Friday, 37 members of Congress had signed a petition calling for full hearings.

According to Defense Department officials, 59,000 military women served within the region managed by the U.S. Central Command, which includes Iraq, Kuwait and Afghanistan, between October 2002 and November 2003. Most were in Iraq and Kuwait.

During 2003, the Army had 80 allegations of sexual misconduct among service members, the Air Force seven, the Marine Corps one and the Navy none, according to the Pentagon. It is unclear how many sexual assaults are part of the Pentagon's tally of sexual misconduct cases, which can include consensual sex under military law.

Neither Rumsfeld nor a statement released to The Post on Friday by undersecretary Chu addressed whether the military justice code would be part of the internal review. Chu's statement said he would explore "the manner in which the (Department of Defense) deals with sexual assault, and our effectiveness in precluding such assault in the first place."

Pentagon officials would not provide additional details about the scope of the inquiry or whether cases highlighted in The Post's coverage would be examined. "It's way too premature for the Department of Defense to answer those questions," Cynthia Colin, a Pentagon spokeswoman, said Friday.

Sen. Wayne Allard, R-Colo., said he was pleased Rumsfeld has taken action.

"These are very serious accusations and they deserve a complete and thorough investigation, and that seems to be where the secretary is headed," Allard said.

Female vet calls inquiry 'lip service'

Leaders of victim advocacy organizations characterized the review as possibly one step toward dealing with problems, but stressed that Pentagon leaders should not gloss over tough issues. In the past, internal inquiries by the military into sexual assault scandals have brought criticisms that they were superficial and riddled with conflicts of interest.

Sharon Mixon, a former combat medic during Operation Desert Storm in 1991 who says she was gang-raped in Kuwait, is skeptical about the latest review.

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Secretary of

“I feel this is a pat response given under public pressure. This is the same lip service that has been given for over 30 years. If there was any substance to this statement, there would be no need for investigation because there would have been zero tolerance all along,” said Mixon, a former member of the Colorado National Guard. “There has been Tailhook and the recent events at the Air Force Academy. Still, nothing. I believe in actions, not words.”

Christine Hansen, executive director of the Miles Foundation, a Connecticut-based victim advocacy organization, called for a “comprehensive, independent look at the military’s approach.”

“Women in the military continue to be threatened while their safety is not addressed.”

The foundation and other advocacy groups have long called for changes in how the Pentagon deals with sexual assault and domestic violence, including extending the same confidentiality protections to soldiers and spouses that victims receive in the civilian world, having victim advocates placed on every base, and criminal investigations not influenced by commanders. They also believe that military culture needs to shift from blaming the victim to holding criminals accountable.

Rumsfeld noted in his memo that the review “should address the reporting of sexual assaults, including the availability of private channels for reporting such issues within combat theaters.”

While calling for an improved response to sexual assaults, Chu defended the military’s past practices, framing problems as part of a larger issue confronting both the armed services and the civilian world.

“Rape and other sexual assaults are crimes that violate the ethos of the military and threaten readiness. ... This issue is too important to allow doubts to fester or concerns be left unaddressed,” Chu wrote.

Mixon, the Desert Storm veteran, questioned whether Pentagon officials can objectively investigate their own ranks. “I feel that if they were really outraged and sincerely seeking to effect change and hold individuals accountable, they would have responded to (the newspaper’s original investigation) months ago,” Mixon said.

“Allowing the military to police themselves and conduct their own investigations is what brought us here in the first place.”

Defense Donald Rumsfeld’s [order to review the military’s handling](#) of sexual assault cases.

The Department of Defense’s [public statement about sexual assaults](#) in the military.

Staff writer Amy Herdy can be reached at 303-820-1752 or at aherdy@denverpost.com. Miles Moffeit can be reached at 303-820-1415 or at mmoffeit@denverpost.com.