Protesters want Panetta to cut military funding for cage fighting

9:21 PM, Aug. 1, 2012

Chris Haubert, left, an administrator for the Panetta Institute, and Eileen Wilson, assistant program coordinator, listen as Liz Keegan outlines the group’s request. / Jay Dunn/The Salinas Californian

Online

To read a copy of the letter to Defense Secretary Leon Panetta, go to: http://bit.ly/ltrPanetta
To learn more about the protest coalition, go to: www.UnfitFortheCorps.org

SEASIDE — A delegation of advocacy groups outraged at the homophobic and sexist behavior coming out of the Ultimate Fighting Championship wants Defense Secretary Leon Panetta to cut off military funding to the popular sport.

More than 50 U.S. military veterans, union activists and advocates for gay and lesbian service members filled the front lobby of the Panetta Institute of Public Policy on Wednesday to hand deliver a letter to Panetta cataloguing a long list of offensive slurs made by some participants in the UFC, the nation’s largest promoter of professional
cage fighting. A copy of a recent sponsorship agreement shows the military funded the UFC $2.1 million for a 12-month period between Dec. 2010 and November 2011, according to Chris Serres, research analyst with Culinary Workers Union Local 226 based in Las Vegas. The UFC uses the money in part for promotion, he said.

Among the slurs made by UFC members were ones that “degraded women, made light of rape, and disparaged homosexuals,” according to a news report.

The letter to Panetta listed several examples of the remarks, including this one: “In December 2011, a UFC fighter was briefly released by the UFC after he posted the following story on his Twitter account: ‘If a rape van was called a surprise van more women wouldn’t mind going for rides in them.’”

Neither Panetta nor his wife, Sylvia Panetta, who runs the institute, were available on Wednesday. However, two members of the institute’s staff took the letter on his behalf and said they would forward it.

The staffers seemed stunned when the protesters arrived, having not been forewarned that they were coming. Bewildered at first, they listened while the group presented its letter of complaint and spoke out.

“The hateful remarks by UFC fighters and others associated with this cage fighting company are deeply offensive to many people in uniform who have served this country with honor and integrity,” said Lorenzo Sanchez, quoting from the letter. Sanchez is a U.S. Coast Guard veteran from Watsonville.

“The Pentagon must immediately put an end to this inappropriate relationship and refrain from using taxpayer money to sponsor the UFC,” Sanchez said.

She and other members of the delegation pointed out that specific comments made by UFC affiliates conflict with the Defense Department’s stated commitment to tolerance for sexual diversity in the military. In a recent videotaped message recognizing Gay Pride Month, Panetta said, “I remain committed to removing as many barriers as possible to make America’s military a model of equal opportunity.”

In a statement, the group said the protest at the Panetta Institute is part of an ongoing project focused on discontinuing military support of the UFC. Since May, over 7,000 people have signed a petition urging the Marine Corps to “renounce its support of the UFC.” According to a press release, veterans and their supporters hand delivered petitions to Marine Corps recruiting stations in several cities.