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U.S. soldier riddles Koran with bullets in Iraq

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BAGHDAD (Reuters) - An American soldier has been disciplined and ordered from Iraq, the U.S. military said on Sunday, for using a copy of the Koran for target practice at a shooting range near Baghdad.

Such an act of desecration of the Muslim holy book could inflame anger against the U.S. military presence in Iraq, but an Iraqi community leader told Reuters an apology by senior American military commanders had helped calm tensions.

Saeed al-Zubaie, head of a U.S.-allied Sunni Arab tribal council in the area where the Koran was found, said the book had been used as target practice. It was peppered with 14 bullet holes and offensive language had been scrawled inside, he said.

"I was feeling bitterness, but as long as they apologized we are OK with them. Our anger has cooled," said Zubaie, adding that Sunni Arab tribal units who work alongside U.S. forces in the area had threatened to quit unless the military took action.

The U.S. television news network CNN said U.S. commanders were met by hundreds of protesters when they went to the village of Radwaniya near Baghdad to deliver the apology.

Colonel Bill Buckner, a U.S. military spokesman, said commanders were ordered to swiftly investigate after Iraqi police found the Koran on May 11 at a firing range in Radwaniya.

He described the incident as "serious and deeply troubling."

"Coalition commanders have briefed local leaders on the results of the investigation and expressed their deep regret," Buckner said in a statement.

"They have also undertaken disciplinary action against the soldier who was involved and he has been removed from Iraq."

Besides being shipped out of Iraq, it was not clear what other disciplinary action was being taken against the soldier.

CNN, which said it was present on Saturday when U.S. commanders made the apology in Radwaniya, said the soldier had been dismissed from his unit. His whereabouts were not immediately known.

In his statement, Buckner stressed that the U.S. military respected Islam and the Koran.

CNN said when Major-General Jeffery Hammond, the commander of U.S. troops in Baghdad, and other officers arrived to deliver the apology to local leaders in Radwaniya they were met by hundreds of protesting Sunni Arab tribesmen.

"I am a man of honor, I am a man of character. You have my word this will never happen again," Hammond told the crowd.

"In the most humble manner, I look into your eyes today and I say, please forgive me and my soldiers," CNN reported on its website.

It said Colonel Ted Martin, a brigade commander, held up a new copy of the Koran which he kissed and touched to his forehead as he handed it to the tribal elders.

"I hope that you'll accept this humble gift," Martin said.

(Additional reporting by Dean Yates; editing by Sami Aboudi)

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