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Bush apologizes to Iraqi PM over Koran shooting

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BAGHDAD (Reuters) - President George W. Bush has apologized to Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki and promised prosecution of a U.S. soldier accused of using a copy of the Koran for target practice, Iraq said on Tuesday.

Bush apologized in a telephone call on Monday with Maliki, who told him the incident had humiliated and angered Iraq's largely Muslim population, the cabinet said in a statement.

"The American president apologized on behalf of the United States ... promising to present the soldier to the courts," it said.

A U.S. embassy spokeswoman said that in the call Bush expressed his deep concern over the "completely unacceptable conduct of an American soldier."

A U.S. soldier has been disciplined and sent home after a bullet-riddled copy of the Muslim holy book was found at a shooting range near Baghdad on May 11. Tribal leaders also accused the soldier of writing offensive language inside the book.

U.S. military commanders in Iraq held a ceremony to formally apologize and present a new Koran to tribal leaders in the area where the incident took place. The number two U.S. commander has also met Iraqi leaders to apologize.

The military has described the incident as "serious and deeply troubling" and stressed that U.S. soldiers respect Islam and the Koran.

There has been no violent backlash in Iraq, as has sometimes occurred elsewhere in the Muslim world after the Islamic faith is perceived to have been insulted, but the Iraqi government has called for the soldier to be severely punished.

Iraq's government spokesman Ali al-Dabbagh said Bush's apology was not enough.

"We need to try this soldier since he committed a grievous crime. This is what the Iraqi government wants. It is not satisfied with just an apology," he said.

The Iraqi cabinet said the U.S. military should also educate its soldiers to respect Islam and Muslim holy sites.

The incident has been deeply embarrassing for the U.S. military, which has been working hard to improve its image among Iraqis and forge alliances with tribal leaders to fight Sunni Islamist al Qaeda militants.

(Writing by Ross Colvin, additional reporting by Aseel Kami, edited by Richard Meares)

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