

Imran Khan lit fire that sparked protests

BY the end of the week, the rioting had spread from Afghanistan throughout much of the Muslim world, from Gaza to Indonesia. Mobs shouting "Protect our Holy Book!" burned down government buildings and ransacked the offices of relief organizations in several Afghan provinces. The violence cost at least 15 lives, injured scores of people and sent a shudder through Washington, where officials worried about the stability of moderate regimes in the region.

The spark was apparently lit at a press conference held on Friday, May 6, by Imran Khan, a Pakistani cricket legend and strident critic of Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf. Brandishing a copy of that week's Newsweek (dated May 9), Khan read a report that US interrogators at Guantánamo prison had placed the Quran on toilet seats and even flushed one. "This is what the US is doing," exclaimed Khan, "desecrating the Quran." His remarks, as well as the outraged comments of Muslim clerics and Pakistani government officials, were picked up on local radio and played throughout neighbouring Afghanistan. Radical Islamic foes of the US-friendly regime of Hamid Karzai quickly exploited local discontent with a poor economy and the continued presence of US forces, and riots began breaking out last week.

Late last week Pentagon spokesman Lawrence DiRita told Newsweek that its original story was wrong. The brief Periscope item ("SouthCom Showdown") had reported on the expected results of an upcoming US Southern

Command investigation into the abuse of prisoners at Gitmo. According to Newsweek, SouthCom investigators found that Gitmo interrogators had flushed a Quran down a toilet in an attempt to rattle detainees. While various released detainees have made allegations about Quran desecration, the Pentagon has, according to DiRita, found no credible evidence to support them.

How did Newsweek get its facts wrong? And how did the story feed into serious international unrest? While continuing to report events on the ground, Newsweek interviewed government officials, diplomats and its own staffers, and reconstructed this narrative of events:

At Newsweek, veteran investigative reporter Michael Isikoff's interest had been sparked by the release late last year of some internal FBI e-mails that painted a stark picture of prisoner abuse at Guantánamo. Isikoff knew that military investigators at Southern Command (which runs the Guantánamo prison) were looking into the allegations. So he called a long time reliable source, a senior US government official who was knowledgeable about the matter. The source told Isikoff that the report would include new details that were not in the FBI e-mails, including mention of flushing the Quran down a toilet. A SouthCom spokesman contacted by Isikoff declined to comment on an ongoing investigation, but Newsweek National Security Correspondent John Barry, realizing the sensitivity of the story, provided a draft of the Newsweek Periscope item to a senior Defence official, asking, "Is this accurate or not?" The

official challenged one aspect of the story: the suggestion that Maj. Gen. Geoffrey Miller, sent to Gitmo by the Pentagon in 2001 to oversee prisoner interrogation, might be held accountable for the abuses. Not true, said the official (the PERISCOPE draft was corrected to reflect that). But he was silent about the rest of the item. The official had not meant to mislead, but lacked detailed knowledge of the SouthCom report.

Given all that has been reported about the treatment of detainees—including allegations that a female interrogator pretended to wipe her own menstrual blood on one prisoner—the reports of Quran desecration seemed shocking but not incredible. But to Muslims, defacing the Holy Book is especially heinous. "We can understand torturing prisoners, no matter how repulsive," says computer teacher Muhammad Archad, interviewed last week by Newsweek in Peshawar, Pakistan, where one of last week's protests took place. "But insulting the Quranis like deliberately torturing all Muslims. This we cannot tolerate."

Newsweek was not the first to report allegations of desecrating the Quran. As early as last spring and summer, similar reports from released detainees started surfacing in British and Russian news reports, and in the Arab news agency Al-Jazeera; claims by other released detainees have been covered in other media since then. But the Newsweek report arrived at a particularly delicate moment in Afghan politics. Opponents of the Karzai government, including remnants of the deposed Taliban regime, have been looking for ways to exploit

public discontent. The Afghan economy is weak, and the government (pressed by the United States) has alienated farmers by trying to eradicate their poppy crops, used to make heroin in the global drug trade. Afghan men are sometimes rounded up during ongoing US military operations, and innocents can sit in jail for months. When they are released, many complain of abuse. President Karzai is still largely respected, but many Afghans regard him as too dependent on and too obsequious to the United States. With Karzai scheduled to come to Washington next week, this is a good time for his enemies to make trouble.

That does not quite explain, however, why the protest and rioting over Quran desecration spread throughout the Islamic region. After so many gruesome reports of torture and abuse at Abu Ghraib and elsewhere, the vehemence of feeling around this case came as something of a surprise. Extremist agitators are at least partly to blame, but obviously the reports of Quranic desecration touch a particular nerve in the Islamic world. US officials, including President George W. Bush, are uneasily watching, and last week Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice pointedly remarked that any desecration of the Quran would not be "tolerated" by the United States. (As a legal matter, US citizens are free to deface the Quran as an exercise of free speech, just as they are free to burn the American flag or tear up a Bible; but government employees can be punished for violating government rules.)

After the rioting began last week, the

across Muslim world

Pentagon attempted to determine the veracity of the Newsweek story. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Richard Myers told reporters that so far no allegations had been proven. He did appear to cryptically refer to two mentions found in the logs of prison guards in Gitmo: a report that a detainee had used pages of the Quran to stop up a crude toilet as a form of protest, and a complaint from a detainee that a prison guard had knocked down a Quran hanging in a bag in his cell.

On Friday night, Pentagon spokesman DiRita called Newsweek to complain about the original PERISCOPE item. He said, "We pursue all credible allegations" of prisoner abuse, but insisted that the investigators had found none involving Quran desecration. DiRita sent Newsweek a copy of rules issued to the guards (after the incidents mentioned by General Myers) to guarantee respect for Islamic worship. On Saturday, Isikoff spoke to his original source, the senior government official, who said that he clearly recalled reading investigative reports about mishandling the Quran, including a toilet incident. But the official, still speaking anonymously, could no longer be sure that these concerns had surfaced in the SouthCom report. Told of what the Newsweek source said, DiRita exploded, "People are dead because of what this son of a bitch said. How could he be credible now?"

In the meantime, as part of his ongoing reporting on the detainee-abuse story, Isikoff had contacted a New York Defence lawyer, Marc Falkoff, who is representing 13 Yemeni detainees at Guantánamo. According to

Falkoff's declassified notes, a mass-suicide attempt—when 23 detainees tried to hang or strangle themselves in August 2003—was triggered by a guard's dropping a Quran and stomping on it. One of Falkoff's clients told him, "Another detainee tried to kill himself after the guard took his Quran and threw it in the toilet." A US military spokesman, Army Col Brad Blackner, dismissed the claims as unbelievable. "If you read the Al Qaeda training manual, they are trained to make allegations against the infidels," he said.

More allegations, credible or not, are sure to come. Bader Zaman Bader, a 35-year-old former editor of a fundamentalist English-language magazine in Peshawar, was released from more than two years' lockup in Guantánamo seven months ago. Arrested by Pakistani security as a suspected Qaeda militant in November 2001, he was handed over to the US military and held at a tent at the Kandahar airfield. One day, Bader claims, as the inmates' latrines were being emptied, a US soldier threw in a Quran. After the inmates screamed and protested, a US commander apologized. Bader says he still has nightmares about the incident.

Such stories may spark more trouble. Though decrepit and still run largely by warlords, Afghanistan was not considered by US officials to be a candidate for serious anti-American riots. But Westerners, including those at Newsweek, may underestimate how severely Muslims resent the American presence, especially when it in any way interferes with Islamic religious faith. **COURTESY NEWSWEEK**