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Bush Defends CIA's Clandestine Prisons

'We Do Not Torture,' President Says

By Michael A. Fletcher

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PANAMA CITY, Nov. 7 -- President Bush, defending a clandestine U.S. prison system abroad for terrorism suspects, said Monday that his administration would continue to aggressively battle terrorism in sometimes unconventional but always lawful ways.

Brushing aside international criticism of the CIA-run prisons set up in eight countries, Bush said that the nation is at war with an enemy "that lurks and plots and plans and wants to hurt America again. And so, you bet, we'll aggressively pursue them, but we'll do so under the law." Bush, who spoke to reporters during a brief visit to the capital of Panama, also asserted, "We do not torture."

His comments followed efforts by Vice President Cheney to lobby lawmakers to exempt the CIA from an amendment that would ban torture and inhumane treatment of prisoners. The exemption would cover the secret prisons.

Bush did not confirm a report in The Washington Post last week revealing the prisons, and he did not directly address a question about the international outcry that has erupted since existence of the prisons was disclosed.

The International Committee of the Red Cross, the European Union and human rights groups demanded information about the prisons, and an E.U. spokesman said their existence could violate international law.

"I'm confident that when people see the facts, that they'll recognize that we've got more work to do," Bush said, "and that we must protect ourselves in a way that is lawful."

The president's remarks here came during his final stop on a five-day trip to Latin America aimed at promoting free trade across the region. Bush encountered resistance from several South American leaders opposed to a U.S.-backed free-trade zone across virtually the entire Western Hemisphere.

But there was no such skepticism from Panama's president, Martin Torrijos.

Torrijos, the son of this country's former military dictator Omar Torrijos, spent part of his youth in the United States, where he once managed a McDonald's restaurant in Chicago and attended Texas A&M University. Since taking office last year, he has been an avid supporter of increased trade, which some other leaders in the region fear would enhance U.S. economic dominance and exacerbate income disparities.

Bush said his administration is close to an agreement with Panama on a bilateral trade accord. But he also accused congressional Democrats of being a potential stumbling block for the deal, saying they had abandoned their party's traditional support of free trade for political reasons.

"I'll do my best to work in the Congress," he said during the news conference, held in a balconied 17th-century mansion. "One area that we need to make progress on is with the Democrat Party."

Bush added that in previous congressional sessions, the Democrats had members "who were willing to make the right decisions, based not on politics but based on what's best for the interests of the country."

That spirit, he said, had evaporated as many Democrats have come to oppose such deals, arguing in part that they do not include sufficient worker and



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Concluding a four-day trip to Latin America with a stop in Panama, President Bush said his administration was close to an agreement with Panama on a bilateral free-trade accord.

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environmental protections for people in developing nations.

Bush also voiced support for a \$10 billion plan to widen the 90-year-old Panama Canal, whose locks are now too narrow to accommodate many ships. "It's in our nation's interest that the canal be modernized," Bush said.

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President Bush received a 39 percent approval rating in the latest Washington Post-ABC News poll, the lowest of his presidency. Which recent president had an approval rating lower than Bush's at this point in his presidency?

Bill Clinton

Richard Nixon

Ronald Reagan

Lyndon B. Johnson

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