

The Big Story

Dempsey: Reports of MIA flaws are discouraging

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Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., center, and Sen. Roger Wicker, R-Miss., right, confer at the start of a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing on the reappointment of Gen. Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, on Capitol Hill in Washington, Thursday, July 18, 2013. Sen. James Inhofe, R-Okla., the ranking member, is at left. (AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite)

WASHINGTON (AP) — An emerging picture of serious flaws in the Pentagon's approach to finding and identifying U.S. missing-in-action troops is discouraging and "moving rapidly toward disgraceful," the nation's top military officer said Thursday.

Gen. Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was asked by Sen. Kelly Ayotte, R-N.H., what he intends to do about the problem. Reports, including one released Wednesday by the Government Accountability Office, detail weak leadership, infighting and other problems inside the teams responsible for MIA accounting.

Dempsey said Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel called him while traveling to make sure Dempsey was aware of the GAO report. He said Hagel "wants to get to the bottom of it" as soon as possible. Dempsey suggested that he had not previously been aware of serious flaws in the MIA accounting effort.

"It's so new, but it's so discouraging and moving rapidly toward disgraceful," Dempsey said. "So I assure you, we will get at it." He also said the commander of Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command, whose teams do the recovery and identification of MIA remains, is "seized with" finding solutions.

Hagel's press secretary, George Little, said Thursday the Pentagon chief "shares (Dempsey's) serious concerns about this top-priority mission and is looking for quick solutions to shortcomings in how it's carried out."

Ayotte said the Senate Armed Services Committee should hold hearings to investigate.

Wednesday's GAO report was requested by Congress last year and was 12 months in the making. It concluded that the MIA accounting mission, while making "some progress," is being "undermined by longstanding leadership weaknesses and a fragmented organizational structure."

In 2009, Congress demanded that the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command accelerate its work so that by 2015, it is identifying at least 200 MIAs per year. That compares with an average of 72 per year over the past decade.

The GAO report said the Pentagon's work on a plan to achieve the 200-per-year target is still incomplete, "due to a fragmented approach to planning and disputes among" the various agencies that share responsibility for the mission. Last year, JPAC reported making 80 identifications of MIA remains.

"Collectively, these weaknesses jeopardize (the Pentagon's) capability and capacity to accomplish the statutory goals of accounting for missing persons and to provide some measure of closure to those families whose loved ones are still missing as a result of their service to their country," the GAO said.

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