WASHINGTON, June 16 - Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld, acting at the request of George J. Tenet, the director of central intelligence, ordered military officials in Iraq last November to hold a man suspected of being a senior Iraqi terrorist at a high-level detention center there but not list him on the prison's rolls, senior Pentagon and intelligence officials said Wednesday.

This prisoner and other "ghost detainees" were hidden largely to prevent the International Committee of the Red Cross from monitoring their treatment, and to avoid disclosing their location to an enemy, officials said.

Maj. Gen. Antonio M. Taguba, the Army officer who in February investigated abuses at the Abu Ghraib prison, criticized the practice of allowing ghost detainees there and at other detention centers as "deceptive, contrary to Army doctrine, and in violation of international law."

This prisoner, who has not been named, is believed to be the first to have been kept off the books at the orders of Mr. Rumsfeld and Mr. Tenet. He was not held at Abu Ghraib, but at another prison, Camp Cropper, on the outskirts of Baghdad International Airport, officials said.

Pentagon and intelligence officials said the decision to hold the detainee without registering him - at least initially - was in keeping with the administration's legal opinion about the status of those viewed as an active threat in wartime.

Seven months later, however, the detainee - a reputed senior officer of Ansar al-Islam, a group the United States has linked to Al Qaeda and blames for some attacks in Iraq - is still languishing at the prison but has only been questioned once while in detention, in what government officials acknowledged was an extraordinary lapse.

"Once he was placed in military custody, people lost track of him," a senior intelligence official conceded Wednesday night. "The normal review processes that would keep track of him didn't."

The detainee was described by the official as someone "who was actively planning operations specifically targeting U.S. forces and interests both inside and outside of Iraq."

But once he was placed into custody at Camp Cropper, where about 100 detainees deemed to have the highest intelligence value are held, he received only one cursory arrival interrogation from military officers and was never again questioned by any other military or intelligence officers, according to Pentagon and intelligence officials.

The Pentagon's chief spokesman, Lawrence Di Rita, said Wednesday that officials at Camp Cropper questioned their superiors several times in recent months about what to do with the suspect.

But only in the last two weeks has Mr. Rumsfeld's top aide for intelligence policy, Stephen A. Cambone, called C.I.A. senior officials to request that the agency deal with the suspect or else have him go into the prison's regular reporting system.

Mr. Di Rita referred questions about the prisoner's fate to the C.I.A.

A senior intelligence official said late Wednesday that "the matter is currently under discussion."

In July 2003, the man suspected of being an Ansar al-Islam official was captured in Iraq and turned over to C.I.A. officials, who took him to an undisclosed location outside of Iraq for interrogation. By that fall, however, a C.I.A. legal analysis determined that because the detainee was deemed to be an Iraqi unlawful combatant - outside the protections of the Geneva Conventions - he should be transferred back to Iraq.

Mr. Tenet made his request to Mr. Rumsfeld - that the suspect be held but not listed - in October. The request was passed down the chain of command: to Gen. Richard B. Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, then to Gen. John P. Abizaid, the commander of American forces in the Middle East, and finally to Lt. Gen. Ricardo S. Sanchez, the ground commander in Iraq. At each stage, lawyers reviewed the request and their bosses approved it.

A senior intelligence official said late Wednesday that the C.I.A. inquired about the detainee's status in January, but was told that American jailers in Iraq could not find him, perhaps as a result of the chaos and confusion of the November and December spike in insurgent violence.

The detention was first reported in this week's U.S. News & World Report. But the role played by senior officials in deciding the detainee's status was not known publicly before Wednesday. Pentagon and intelligence officials gave new details on Wednesday about the prisoner and the circumstances that brought him to Camp Cropper, including the fact that his status was decided by Mr. Tenet and Mr. Rumsfeld, and approved by senior officers.

While acknowledging mistakes in the prisoner's detention, the senior intelligence official said the detainee posed a significant threat to American forces in Iraq and elsewhere. "He also possessed significant information about Ansar al Islam's leadership structure, training
and locations," the official said.

At Camp Cropper, some prisoners had been held since June 2003 for nearly 23 hours a day in solitary confinement in small cells without sunlight, according to a report by the international Red Cross.

The suspected Ansar official was segregated from the other detainees and was not listed on the rolls. Under the order that had filtered down to General Sanchez, military police were not to disclose the detainee's whereabouts to the Red Cross pending further directives.

The prisoner fell into legal limbo as the military police pressed their superiors for guidance, which has still not formally come.

"Over the course of the next several weeks, the custodians at the prison asked for additional guidance, but there were no interrogations," Mr. Di Rita said.

Before this case surfaced, the C.I.A. has said it had discontinued the ghost detainee practice, but said that the Geneva Conventions allowed a delay in the identification of prisoners to avoid disclosing their whereabouts to an enemy.

In Washington, the Army announced that Gen. Paul J. Kern, the head of the Army Matériel Command, would oversee an Army inquiry into the role military intelligence soldiers played in the abuses at Abu Ghraib. General Kern replaces General Sanchez as the senior officer reviewing the findings. General Sanchez removed himself from that role so he could be interviewed by investigators.