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POLITICS | NATIONAL SECURITY

# White House to Urge Pentagon to Remove Sexual-Harassment, Assault Cases from Military Chain of Command

Officials say the White House will call on Congress to pass legislation making the changes



Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin responding to a question during a press briefing on May 6.

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By [Nancy A. Youssef](#)

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WASHINGTON—The White House will urge the U.S. military to remove sexual harassment and assault cases from the chain of command and hand them off to independent military lawyers, senior administration officials said, marking one of the biggest changes in the history of the military justice system.

The changes were spurred by growing frustration on Capitol Hill about the military's inability to tackle the problem. The military's statistics show that even though the Pentagon has said it has made a priority of preventing sexual assault and

harassment in the ranks, reported incidents have doubled in the past decade

The White House will push Congress to enact legislation making the necessary legal changes, and then give the military until 2023 to implement them, the senior administration officials told reporters during a telephone briefing

The White House will also announce changes aimed at “professionalizing the sexual-assault response” within the military, one of the administration officials said

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, at the urging of President Biden, named an independent review commission to assess how the U.S. military could better prevent sexual harassment and sexual assault. The changes to be announced late Friday are based on the commission’s 28 recommendations

The commission found a “troubling gap” between how military commanders described sexual harassment and assault within their ranks and the experiences of junior members, the administration officials said. The commission found that the military had inadequately implemented prevention measures, the officials said

“Leadership is the key to correcting all these deficiencies,” one of the senior administration officials said.

While the military has over the past decade described preventing sexual harassment and assault as a priority, its statistics showed little progress

The Defense Department’s annual report on sexual assault, released in May, found 7,816 reported instances of sexual assault across the armed services during the most recent fiscal year, nine fewer than the cases reported the previous year. Those figures are more than double the 3,327 reported in 2010.

The push to tackle the issue has been spurred, in part by pressure from Capitol Hill. Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D., N.Y.) has introduced legislation that would strip commanders of their authority to decide whether charges should be brought for major crimes that occur within their ranks

While leaders of the military branches said they supported changes in how the military prosecuted sexual harassment and assault they opposed taking serious crimes out of the chain of command arguing that would undermine military

leadership and could erode prevention efforts

With 66 senators as co-sponsors, Sen. Gillibrand's bill, the Military Justice Improvement and Increasing Prevention Act, has more than enough support to overcome the chamber's 60-vote threshold to advance most legislation

The administration officials wouldn't say whether the White House supported removing handling of all major crimes from the chain of command

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