Experts rebut Romney claims on ex-Iran chief

By **Associated Press**
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BOSTON -- Three human rights organizations and other experts are disputing Gov. Mitt Romney's claims that former Iran President Mohammed Khatami was responsible for the torture and murder of dissidents.

Romney made the allegations earlier this week when he ordered all state agencies to refuse assistance when Khatami speaks today at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government.

"Khatami oversaw the torture and murder of Iranian students, journalists and others who spoke out for freedom and democracy," Romney said. "Khatami relaxed freedom of speech laws giving democracy reformers a false sense of security only to engage in one of the largest crackdowns in the country's history."

But Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and Iran Human Rights Documentation Center -- three leading groups monitoring human rights abuses in Iran -- disputed parts of Romney's statement.

The groups said Khatami was a moderate who worked largely in vain to expand political freedoms. Violent crackdowns on democracy protesters during Khatami's presidency from 1997 to 2005 are believed to have been initiated by his rivals and approved by Iran's ruling Muslim clerics.

"That is an exaggeration to say that he oversaw the abuses. That is definitely wrong," said Hadi Ghaemi, Iran researcher for the New York-based Human Rights Watch.

Michael Rubin, a scholar at the conservative American Enterprise Institute who is a critic of Khatami, also took issue with Romney's comments.

"What is factually correct is to say he turned a blind eye" to the crackdown, said Rubin. "He didn't oversee it."

Romney spokesman, Eric Fehrnstrom, cited "Iranian dissidents" as the source of allegations that Khatami oversaw the murder and torture of democratic activists. Fehrnstrom said Khatami should be held responsible for abuses during his presidency.

"Presidents should not be allowed to divorce themselves from the policies of their own country," he said.