Democrats praise treatment of Guantánamo detainees

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Members of US Congress returning from a tour of the Guantánamo Bay prison camp last weekend praised the treatment of detainees at the facility as "humane." A 16-member, bipartisan contingent from the US House Armed Services Committee traveled to the camp for a one-day visit on Saturday and a number of senators visited on Sunday.

More than 520 detainees, classified as "enemy combatants" by the Bush administration, are currently imprisoned at Guantánamo. Many have been held for more than three years and only four have been charged with any crime. A British lawyer who recently visited the camp has charged that at least five juveniles under the age of 18 have been arrested and brought to the camp, including one who is currently being held in solidarity confinement.

Last month, Amnesty International charged that the Bush administration had authorized "interrogation techniques that violated the UN Convention Against Torture" at Guantánamo and the secretary general of the London-based human rights organization denounced the camp as the "gulag of our time" and called for it to be shut down.

But to listen to the comments of the congressmen returning from the Guantánamo trip, one would have the impression that great strides in human rights are being made. Sen. Jim Bunning, Republican of Kentucky, said he was surprised to learn that some detainees "even have air conditioning and private showers." Republican Senator Michael D. Crapo of Idaho said US troops at the camp "get more abuse from the detainees than they give to the detainees."

At a time when opposition among the American population to Bush's war policy has reached an all-time high, the "fact-finding" mission amounted to a public relations stunt to boost the government's sagging ratings and dampen criticism of the war and the use of torture at US prisons in Guantanamo, Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere. It was strategically timed for the weekend before Bush's nationally televised speech on Iraq.

To a man, alongside their Republican colleagues, congressional Democrats who visited the prison camp lauded the treatment of the detainees. They all pretended that the dog and pony show staged for them by military authorities at the prison camp provided a true picture of the conditions under which prisoners are being held.

The congressmen toured cell blocks and ate lunch with US troops. They watched the interrogations of three detainees, including one who was read a Harry Potter book for hours until he turned his back and covered his ears. Much was made of the lunch of chicken, rice and okra that the congressmen shared with the US troops, which was also reportedly fed to the prisoners.

Amnesty International official Jumana Musa dismissed the tour as "this little congressional show and tell." Whether or not people are being fed orange chicken," Ms. Musa said, "does not get at the heart of the issue."

The Democrats were nevertheless insistent that real steps improvements were being made. California Rep. Ellen Tauscher said, "The Guantánamo we saw today is not the Guantánamo we heard about a few years ago." Texas Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee, who previously called for the camp to be closed, said, "What we've seen here is evidence that we've made progress."

Democratic Senators Ron Wyden (Oregon) and Ben Nelson (Nebraska) were also in Cuba over the weekend—to discuss new agricultural trade measures—and stopped by the Guantánamo camp on

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Sunday. “I feel very good” about the detainees’ treatment, Wyden said.

At a press conference on Monday, he added, “Despite multiple instances of unacceptable practices in the past by US personnel at Guantánamo, based on what I learned and observed I strongly prefer the improved procedures and conditions at Camp Delta to the outsourcing of prisoner interrogation to countries with a far less firm commitment to human rights...

“The Bush administration is correct when they say these are unique circumstances. We are in a war and these are not your garden-variety criminal defendants.”

In a press release Monday, Nelson praised the leadership of US Army Brigadier General Jay Hood, commander of the Joint Task Force (JTF) at Guantánamo, saying Hood “has taken steps to improve conditions for detainees and to ensure proper use of interrogation techniques.”

The Democrats’ comments are all the more cynical coming in the wake of new charges of abuse at Guantánamo. A report in the upcoming July 7 issue of the *New England Journal of Medicine* says that since late 2002, psychiatrists and psychologist have participated in a program designed to increase fear and distress among prisoners so as to extract information.

Lawyers representing Guantánamo detainees charge that interrogators are conducting a campaign to interfere with lawsuits filed on behalf of 200 prisoners. Thomas Wilner, an attorney representing 11 Kuwaiti detainees, said in court papers that detainees have been pressured to drop their lawsuits by interrogators who told them that most of the prisoners who have been released did not have counsel.

USA Today quotes attorney Marc Falkoff, who represents 15 Yemeni detainees, saying, “They believe they have been punished for having lawyers, and they are convinced that they will not be allowed out of Guantánamo so long as they keep their lawyers.”

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