

Guantánamo Bay hunger strike enters third month

Richard Phillips
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The latest in a series of increasingly determined hunger strikes by Guantánamo prisoners entered its third month last week. The protest began on August 8 and has involved over 150 men, or more than a third of all detainees in the US navy prison.

The detainees, who are held without charge, are demanding their basic legal rights under the Geneva Conventions. They want adequate food and shelter, clean water, the right to challenge their incarceration before an independent commission—not the Pentagon’s kangaroo court style panels—and an end to the ongoing physical and psychological abuse and to religious persecution. They have vowed to fast until death if their demands are not met.

In line with White House policy, the Pentagon has refused to provide any detailed information on the protest, while repeating the lie that prisoners are being treated “humanely”. Last week Captain John Edmondson, head of the Guantánamo prison hospital, claimed that “no lives were at risk” and that some of those involved in hunger strike were just trying “to get attention”.

But according to Amnesty International and human rights lawyer Clive Stafford Smith, who is representing 42 of the hunger strikers, 21 have been admitted to hospital and are being force-fed through nasal catheters. The emaciated prisoners are shackled to their beds to stop them removing the tubes.

Stafford Smith told the BBC “Evening News” on September 9 that one of the reasons for the latest hunger strike was the ongoing incarceration of children in Guantánamo. He reported that an estimated 20 children were being held in the prison, including some in solitary confinement.

While the International Committee of the Red Cross and other human rights organisations have warned that

the hunger strikers face irreparable damage or death, there has been little media coverage of the desperate protest and its consequences.

The latest fast was preceded by an almost month-long protest, beginning on 21 June with a coordinated hunger strike in all five camps at Guantánamo. Almost 200 prisoners participated with some detainees refusing food for 26 days. Military authorities are reported to have force-fed over 50 men intravenously.

News of this previous hunger strike was not made public until weeks later when the Pentagon declassified testimony given by prisoners to their defence attorneys. Under US military guidelines, all notes of defence attorney-client conversations must be submitted to a Virginia military intelligence office, which then decides whether they can be released or their contents publicly discussed.

Hand-written testimony by Omar Deghayes, a 35-year-old British resident, gives some indication of the situation facing prisoners. He described incarceration in Guantánamo as a “slow death”, where “disrespect to all religious rituals” prevailed, prisoners were “degraded and abused” and there was no proper access to medicine, washing facilities or sunlight.

Deghayes, who studied law in Britain, has been the target of regular abuse during his almost four-year incarceration. He reported that in 2003 prison guards entered his cell “singing and laughing” before spraying him with mace and digging their fingers into his eyes while an officer shouted “More! More”. He was assaulted because he had refused to submit to a rectal search and has been blind in his right eye since the attack.

Reporting on the third week of the June hunger strike, he wrote that the cellblocks echoed with the sound of groaning “thinned-down prisoners coughing up blood

or falling unconscious on the floor”. Deghayes said the prison hospital was so “inundated with hunger strikers” that many of the fasting detainees had to be moved to the adjoining naval hospital, where they were force-fed.

The men ended their protest on July 28, after Guantánamo military chiefs agreed to the establishment of a prisoners’ representative committee comprised of six detainees from each jail block. They also pledged that the Guantánamo detention centre would comply with the Geneva Conventions within 10 days. The prisoners were told that Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld had endorsed this agreement.

But this promise was never implemented and as soon as media coverage died down, the abuse resumed, with sexual humiliation and the severe beating of several prisoners by the military’s Extreme Reaction Force. When prisoners began the current hunger strike on August 8, Guantánamo commanders immediately placed members of the prisoners’ representative committee in solitary confinement.

In a written statement released through his lawyer, Ethiopian-born British resident Binyam Mohammed said he and scores of other prisoners would fast until death, unless awarded their basic rights. The 27-year-old, who has not been charged with any crime, was arrested in Pakistan in July 2002 and then “rendered” to Morocco where he was tortured for 18 months. He was moved to Afghanistan and then Guantánamo in early 2004.

He declared: “Bobby Sands petitioned the British government to stop the illegitimate internment of Irishmen without trial. He had the courage of his convictions and he starved himself to death. Nobody should believe for one moment that my brothers here have less courage...

“We ask only for justice; treat us, as promised under the rules of the Geneva Conventions for Civilian Prisoners while we are held, and either try us fairly for a valid criminal charge or set us free.”

In contrast to the Guantánamo detainees, Irish prisoners involved in the 1981 hunger strike were allowed legal, family and medical visits. The Pentagon, however, refuses to allow any family members or even independent doctors to visit or telephone the Guantánamo hunger strikers. Moreover, the handful of defence attorneys permitted to visit the protesting prisoners were only able to do so after launching

emergency legal action in US courts on August 30.

Last Friday, defence attorneys petitioned a US federal court to demand military records of prisoners’ medical treatments, meal schedules, punishment and hospitalisation during the current and all previous hunger strike protests.

A detailed report issued last month by the Center for Constitutional Rights (see link below) details the ongoing prisoner resistance to the concentration-camp conditions inside the US military hellhole.

Organised dissent, including hunger strikes and other self-harm protests, began in early 2002, not long after the US started incarcerating so-called “illegal combatants” from Afghanistan, Pakistan and other countries in Guantánamo, and has been escalating over the past three and a half years.

The first hunger strike started in February 2002 and developed into a rolling fast, which involved over 190 prisoners and continued until May 2002. Several prisoners refused food continuously for over 60 days until they were admitted to hospital and forced fed.

In December 2002, detainees began another hunger strike and a coordinated suicide attempt. Eight months later, in August 2003, 23 prisoners tried to hang themselves during an eight-day period. The Pentagon claimed these suicide attempts were not serious and labeled them “manipulative, self-injurious behavior”.

These protests were in response to interrogation methods introduced when Major General Geoffrey Miller was appointed Guantánamo chief in late 2002. These techniques included systematic physical and psychological abuse, sexual persecution and the use of dogs to terrorise detainees, which were applied at Abu Ghraib prison after Miller was transferred to Iraq.

The fact that scores of detainees are now prepared to starve themselves to death rather than submit to the cruel and inhuman conditions at Guantánamo is another damning refutation of White House claims that its so-called “war on terrorism” is in “defence of democracy” and further evidence that the Bush administration is guilty of war crimes.



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