

Guantánamo prisoners clash with guards after new rash of suicide attempts

David Walsh
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The US military has provided conflicting reports of a clash that took place Thursday between guards and prisoners at the Guantánamo Bay, Cuba internment camp. Initially, a spokesman reported that inmates, wielding improvised weapons, had confronted guards when the latter attempted to prevent another detainee from committing suicide. The suicide attempt was said to be the fourth of the day.

Navy Commander Robert Durand, public affairs director for the US prison and interrogation network, claimed that “minimum force was used to quell the disturbance and prevent the suicide.” Two of the four men who attempted suicide were reportedly hospitalized and under observation. Those involved in the riot were moved to maximum-security confinement. No names or nationalities were revealed.

Durand disingenuously told the media, “At this point, I have no idea of the motive, no idea of any coordination and no idea of any intended message.”

During a media teleconference later on Friday, Navy Rear Admiral Harry B. Harris Jr., commander of Joint Task Force Guantánamo, described events that were more in the order of a minor uprising. Harris told reporters that inmates had lured guards into a dorm-like room by a prisoner pretending to prepare to hang himself. “When the guard force entered the compound to intervene, they were then assaulted by the other detainees in the block,” he said. “The detainees had slickened the floor of their block with feces, urine and soapy water in an attempt to trip the guards. They then assaulted the guards with broken light fixtures, fan blades” and other weapons.

The American guards, according to a Reuters report, “used pepper spray and then blasted the inmates with several shots from a shotgun that fired rubber balls to gain control of the inmates and used an M203 grenade launcher that shot a blunt rubber object, US officials said. The fighting lasted four to five minutes, they said, and the detainees at one point were winning the fight.” Six prisoners were injured.

Army Colonel Michael I. Bumgarner, commander of the Joint Detention Group, who was also on the conference call, told reporters that two guards were knocked to the ground after inmates jumped on them from beds. “We were losing the fight at that point,” he said. Bumgarner said the fighting lasted about an hour in total. He claimed that fifteen guards worked in support of the 10-man rapid response team that subdued the inmates. According to the Armed Forces Press Service, “While authorities worked to end the fighting in the first bay, detainees in two other bays began acting out by damaging their accommodations, destroying fans, light fixtures and security cameras.”

As for the wave of suicides, Harris claimed that one detainee was found unconscious early in the day after deliberately overdosing on medication. Another prisoner “complained of dizziness after taking

about five pills.... It turns out that this detainee simply had a bad reaction to drugs prescribed to him. This was not a suicide attempt.” But later a second genuine suicide attempt was discovered. Harris asserted that “this detainee is also stable and unconscious at the naval hospital.” Another inmate told guards he had tried to kill himself, but did not have sufficient drugs, Harris told the news conference, so this was not considered a real attempt. “At the end of the day, we have two confirmed suicide attempts,” he remarked.

Whatever actually occurred May 18, and there is good reason to be skeptical about every word that comes out of the mouth of a US military representative, the events underscore the hellish conditions at the internment camp, whose existence is a national disgrace. In the minds of many millions of people around the world, ‘Guantánamo’ is identified with perpetual incarceration without trial and various forms of mental and physical torture. Its establishment in January 2002 contravened international law and it has remained an outpost of illegality and sadism ever since. And yet there is no outrage in the US mass media or the Democratic Party, all of whom are the Bush administration’s accomplices in this criminal enterprise.

On the same day as violence erupted at Guantánamo, the United Nations Committee Against Torture urged that the detention center be closed, observing that the detention of persons indefinitely without charge “constitutes *per se* a violation of the Convention [Against Torture].”

Following the clash May 18, Durand claimed that there had been 39 suicide attempts by 23 prisoners since the internment camp opened in January 2002. This flies in the face of information provided earlier by the American military. The US Southern Command previously reported some 350 “self-harm events” and “hanging gestures” in 2003 alone. In one weeklong protest in 2003, it said 23 prisoners attempted to hang or strangle themselves. The Southern Command documented 110 suicide attempts in 2004.

One prisoner, Jumah al-Dossari, a 31-year-old Bahraini, has allegedly tried to take his own life some 12 times. An attorney for al-Dossari, Joshua Colangelo-Bryan, said that he visited his client recently and saw scars on his throat and the back of his neck from his most recent attempt in March. Colangelo-Bryan, told the *Associated Press* that the suicide attempts reflect the desperation of detainees held for more than four years with no idea when, if ever, they will be released. “Under these circumstances, it’s hardly surprising that people become desperate and hopeless enough to attempt suicide,” the attorney commented.

In a statement al-Dossari composed in July 2005, which was made available to Amnesty International, he wrote of “the revolting torture and those vile attacks which were a humiliation and will continue to

be a vile stain on history, memories that whenever I look back on them, I wonder how my soft heart could bear them, how my body could bear the pain of the torture and how my mind could bear all that stress. How I wish my memories and my thoughts could be forgotten.” According to Amnesty International, “On 15 October 2005, Jumah al-Dossari attempted to hang himself after going into the toilet during an interview with his lawyer. In November 2005 he told his lawyer that he had wanted to kill himself so that he could send a message to the world that the conditions at Guantánamo are intolerable. He added that he had tried to do it in a public way so that the military could not cover it up and his death would not be anonymous. This suicide attempt left him with a broken vertebra and 14 stitches in his right arm.”

A hunger strike that began last August at Guantánamo involved some 131 prisoners. In response, the military resorted to strapping prisoners into restraint chairs in cold isolation cells and force-feeding them. The brutal US actions were denounced by 263 doctors, including famed neurologist Oliver Sacks, in a letter to *Lancet*, the British medical journal, published in March 2006. The statement noted that the World Medical Association, to which the American Medical Association is a signatory, specifically prohibits force-feeding. Several prisoners continue to refuse food and are still being force-fed.

Some 460 detainees remain at the Guantánamo Bay facility, out of a total of 759 who have been incarcerated there. Many have been transferred to their home countries, with their fates unknown. In its report calling for the closure of the prison camp, the UN Committee Against Torture urged the US government to “permit access by the detainees to judicial process or release them as soon as possible, ensuring that they are not returned to any State where they could face a real risk of being tortured, in order to comply with its obligations under the [international anti-torture] Convention.”

The report also recommended that Washington should avoid using secret detention facilities and investigate and disclose the existence of any such prisons. It called for an end to all forms of torture, by military or civilian personnel, from detention centers under US control and the prosecution and punishment of all perpetrators of acts of torture and responsible superiors. The Committee criticized the practice of sending suspects to states where they may be tortured, the practice known as “extraordinary rendition.” It asked the US to report back within a year with its response to the concerns about secret prisons, extraordinary rendition and the use of interrogation techniques that have resulted in deaths.

The Bush administration rejected the Committee’s findings out of hand. State Department legal adviser John B. Bellinger III, who led the American delegation at the UN panel, claimed that the committee had not read much of the information Washington had provided, or had ignored it. “There are a number of both factual inaccuracies and legal misstatements about the law applicable to the United States,” Bellinger told the press.

In fact, the Committee, which has no power to enforce its recommendations, acted quite timidly, considering the record of US abuses. Fearful of offending Washington, Andreas Mavrommatis, a Cypriot human rights expert who chaired the panel’s review of American conduct, told the media the report should not be blown out of proportion because overall the US has “a very good record of human rights.”

George W. Bush’s new press secretary Tony Snow told the Associated Press, “It is important to note that everything that is done

in terms of questioning detainees is fully within the boundaries of American law.” Snow asserted that the US ensures detainees have food, clothing and other basic necessities as well as giving them the chance to worship. “In short,” Snow said, “we are according every consideration consistent with not only the law but the needs of safety and security at Guantánamo to the people who are there.”

This is a lie, as the testimony not only of former detainees, but FBI officials and others, has revealed. The most savage treatment has been meted out to prisoners at Guantánamo—beatings, sexual humiliation and other forms of physical and mental torture

The list of sanctioned techniques, approved by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld in December 2002, included the use of “stress positions,” clothing removal, 20-hour interrogations, isolation for up to 30 days, sensory deprivation, deceptions, such as pretending the interrogator was from a country known for torture (“false flag”), and inducing stress by playing upon detainee phobias (such as fear of dogs).

One FBI official, in an August 2004 memo, revealed how the US military was “according every consideration” to the prisoners at Guantánamo: “On a couple of occasions, I entered interview rooms to find a detainee chained hand and foot in a fetal position to the floor, with no chair, food or water. Most times they had urinated or defecated on themselves and had been left there for 18-24 hours or more.... On another occasion, the A/C had been turned off, making the temperature in the unventilated room probably well over 100 degrees. The detainee was almost unconscious on the floor with a pile of hair next to him. He had apparently been literally pulling his own hair out throughout the night.”

This is not the first UN report recommending the closure of the notorious military concentration camp. In February 2006 the Commission on Human Rights, alleging that some aspects of the treatment amounted to torture, advised the US government to “close the Guantánamo Bay detention facilities without further delay.” It also called on Washington to “refrain from any practice amounting to torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, discrimination on the basis of religion, and violations of the rights to health and freedom of religion. In particular, all special interrogation techniques authorized by the Department of Defense should immediately be revoked.” US officials dismissed the report, calling its charges “largely without merit.”



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