

Three prisoners commit suicide in Guantánamo gulag

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In an act of desperation that underscores the monstrous conditions at the US concentration camp at Guantánamo Bay, three prisoners committed suicide early Saturday morning, hanging themselves with primitive nooses made from bed sheets. The deaths were the first among Guantánamo prisoners to be confirmed by US authorities.

Two of the prisoners were Saudi nationals and the third was Yemeni, according to American officials. All three left behind suicide notes written in Arabic, although none were made public. The three men had been involved in hunger strikes over the past year carried out by detainees to protest their sadistic and illegal treatment. The hunger strikers, including the three who took their own lives, have been force-fed by their captors, who have used the brutal procedure of strapping their victims into metal chairs and shoving feeding tubes down their throats.

The triple suicide is the latest in a series of increasingly desperate actions by the Guantánamo prisoners, who have in many cases been held for more than four years, have been denied the minimum legal rights required under international conventions, and confront the prospect of spending the rest of their lives in the US prison camp.

Since the facility opened there have been 41 suicide attempts by 25 detainees, officials said, including 23 attempts during August of 2003, 10 on a single day, although these efforts were not revealed by the Pentagon until January of 2005.

There have been multiple hunger strikes in 2005 and 2006, some involving as many as a third of all the prisoners. Last fall the US Southern Command, which runs the prison, decided to begin systematic force-feeding, employing a method of insertion of the feeding tube so violent that it frequently caused internal

bleeding. Under this torture, the bulk of prisoners abandoned the hunger strike, although several dozen resumed the strike earlier this year.

Last month, two detainees attempted suicide by overdoses of antidepressant drugs they had accumulated in their cells. A few days later there was an organized uprising, in which a half-dozen prisoners attacked guards with makeshift weapons.

US officials refused to release the names of the three suicide victims, but the Interior Ministry of Saudi Arabia identified the two Saudis as Ani bin Shaman bin Turki al Habradi and Yasser Talal Abdullah Yahya al Zahrani.

A Saudi attorney for his country's detainees at Guantánamo, Katib al-Shimari, denounced the US government for the suicides, while suggesting that the three may have been murdered. "Their suicide, that is, if they did commit suicide, is a response to the oppression and injustice they lived in," he told the satellite television station Al-Arabiya. "I hold the US authorities responsible for their deaths."

US officials have refused to allow foreign lawyers to meet with any of the detainees, limiting the consultations to lawyers who are US citizens and have security clearances from the Pentagon.

The deputy director of the state-sponsored Saudi Human Rights Group, Mufleh al-Qahtani, said in a statement to the local press, "There are no independent monitors at the detention camp so it is easy to pin the crime on the prisoners ... it's possible they were tortured."

Other defense attorneys and civil liberties and human rights organizations joined in the denunciation of the Guantánamo regime, in which prisoners—the majority kidnapped from Afghanistan during and after the US invasion—have been held in isolation, with little contact

with the outside world and no prospect of having their cases heard by a court or other panel where their rights would be respected. Only ten of the approximately 460 men now held at Guantánamo have been charged with any crime, and none have been tried.

The vast majority of the prisoners at Guantánamo are either rank-and-file soldiers seized on the battlefield in Afghanistan or the victims of kidnapping by the Northern Alliance or the Pakistani military dictatorship, who were then sold to the US military for profit.

William H. Goodman, legal director at the Center for Constitutional Rights, which represents several hundred prisoners in lawsuits filed in US courts, said, “These are the latest victims and the most serious so far in the ongoing effort of this administration to impose a lawless system that denies justice, fairness and due process to people throughout the world.”

“We all had the sense that these men were getting more and more hopeless,” Goodman added. “This is an act of desperation because they have no way to prove their innocence. A system without justice is a system without hope.”

Kenneth Roth, head of Human Rights Watch in New York, told the BBC the men had probably been driven by despair. “These people are despairing because they are being held lawlessly,” he said. “There’s no end in sight. They’re not being brought before any independent judges. They’re not being charged and convicted for any crime.”

An official of Amnesty International in Washington DC, Jumana Musa, said “People have been indefinitely detained for five years without any prospect of ever going home, or ever seeing their families, or ever being charged, or having any resolution. There is no question that serious psychological trauma comes from that.”

The United Nations commission against torture joined the growing international condemnation of Guantánamo last month, declaring the treatment of the prisoners, particularly their indefinite detention without prospect of trial or eventual release, a form of torture. The commission called on the Bush administration to close the prison.

Bush has made several comments recently suggesting that he would like to see the facility closed and the prisoners put on trial. But these noises are merely for international consumption: in practice, the Pentagon has begun a \$30 million expansion of the prison to

make room for another

100 medium-security prisoners.

None of the condemnations by outside agencies and human rights groups, however, are as damning as the truly pathological comments made by the two top military officials responsible for Guantánamo, base commander Rear Admiral Harry Harris and General John Craddock, head of the Southern Command.

Harris said the three prisoners had “no regard for life, either ours or their own... I believe this was not an act of desperation, but an act of asymmetrical warfare waged against us.”

Craddock added, “This is a determined, intelligent, committed element. They continue to do everything they can... to become martyrs in the jihad.”

The Orwellian character of these remarks, worthy of the commandant of a Nazi concentration camp, needs no elaboration. A regime which can portray the suicide of desperate prisoners as an “an act of... warfare waged against us” is capable of any lie or any crime.



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