

Hunger strike expanding despite repression at Guantánamo prison camp

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Despite the threat of retaliation by prison guards, several more Guantánamo prisoners recently joined an ongoing hunger strike, according to an April 8 article in the *New York Times*. US authorities acknowledge that 13 prisoners are now on hunger strike, though lawyers who have recently visited the prison put the number as high as 40.

In October 2005, after as many as 150 prisoners, or more than a third of the prison's population, had joined a long-running hunger strike, the prison authorities ordered a ruthless force-feeding crackdown. Hunger strikers were strapped to restraint chairs, and feeding tubes were forcefully inserted through the prisoners' nostrils without anesthetic, often while the prisoner struggled to remove the tube. Prison guards lacking the requisite medical training used tubes "with the bile and the blood still on the tube from the previous detainee," according to one lawyer who spoke with the victims of this procedure.

The number of strikers dropped precipitously in the face of this vindictive policy.

That a hunger strike could now expand under conditions where prisoners can expect this treatment can only reflect the desperation of the Guantánamo inmates, who have been placed outside the protection of both international and US federal law. Many of the inmates, some of whom were captured as teenagers, are in their fifth year of incarceration, and in the five-year history of the camp, only 10 prisoners have ever been charged with a crime.

"My wish is to die," 27-year-old Adnan Farhan Abdullatif of Yemen said through his lawyer. "We are living in a dying situation."

The newly expanded Guantánamo Bay prison houses almost 400 individuals, most swept up in the initial stages of the invasion of Afghanistan in 2002 and

carried away by US soldiers. The prison's name has become synonymous with torture, humiliation, religious persecution, sexual abuse, and the abrogation of the most basic democratic rights associated with the so-called "war on terror."

The brutal force-feeding practices at Guantánamo have been widely documented and roundly denounced by numerous human rights watch groups, including the American Civil Liberties Union, Amnesty International (AI), the Center for Constitutional Rights, Human Rights First, the UN Human Rights Commission, and Physicians for Human Rights.

A recent AI report cited one prisoner who described how "three times, the tube had been inserted the wrong way so that it went into his lungs; he said he frequently vomited after being force-fed and was not given clean clothes."

"Guards have allegedly subjected hunger-striking detainees in one block to further punitive treatment," the report continued, "such as pepper spraying them or turning the air-conditioning up high." (see "Amnesty International report: conditions for Guantánamo prisoners worsening")

Sami al-Hajj, a 38-year-old former cameraman for the Al-Jazeera news agency, described the terror and pain that accompanied the prolonged presence of the feeding tube in his throat in a diary entry he gave to his lawyer: "I said I would begin to scream unless they took it out.... They finally did."

Navy Cmdr. Robert Durand, a Guantánamo spokesman, acknowledged in statements to the press that all of the current hunger strikers are being force-fed though feeding tubes inserted through the nose. Some have been relocated to a special "feeding block" outfitted with restraint chairs designed for the more determined hunger strikers.

Guantánamo officials have defended the practice of force-feeding as “safe and humane.”

According to lawyers for the inmates, the renewed hunger strike is largely a response to the opening in December 2006 of a \$38 million concrete-walled facility dubbed “Camp 6,” which features tiny, sealed, windowless cells for each inmate. Many inmates who were formerly housed in primitive cages next to other inmates now find themselves arbitrarily placed in solitary confinement in Camp 6, deprived of all contact with other inmates and the outside world.

According to the recent AI report, prisoners at Camp 6, which houses 160 inmates, are kept locked in their sealed cells for 22 hours a day and are only allowed two hours of exercise in mesh cages each day. Bright fluorescent lights are kept on at all times, temperatures are kept low, contact between prisoners is forbidden, virtually no personal items are allowed, and female guards watch prisoners while they shower and use the toilet.

Under these conditions, it is no surprise that the mental health of the prisoners deteriorates rapidly and prisoners are willing to take more reckless and desperate actions to call attention to their situation.

“They’re just sitting on a powder keg down there,” lawyer Sabin Willett told the *Times*. “You’re going to have an insane asylum.”



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