

Another Guantánamo Bay prisoner attempts suicide

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As the Supreme Court hears arguments to determine whether prisoners held at Guantánamo Bay should have the right to challenge their indefinite detention in US courts, fresh evidence has emerged of the brutal conditions at the gulag.

A military official confirmed this week that a prisoner at Guantánamo Bay attempted to kill himself in early November by slicing his throat with a sharpened fingernail. After much bleeding, several stitches were required to close the wound. The prisoner survived.

Zachary Katznelson, a lawyer for the prisoner, told the *Los Angeles Times* that the individual is an Algerian man who has been held without charges and without access to a lawyer for almost six years. No additional information has been made available to the media.

The means employed by the prisoner to end his own life underscores the desperation of prisoners who have been systematically isolated, tortured and stripped of their will to live.

Commander Andrew Haynes, the deputy commander of the guard force in Guantánamo Bay, said that there have been four to six incidents of “self harm”—a euphemism for attempted suicide—by prisoners at Guantánamo Bay in the last two months.

Four prisoners have committed suicide in the past year-and-a-half—one in May and three the previous June. The three in June of 2006 hanged themselves with their bed linens. In 2003, there were 350 incidents of “self harm,” including 120 hanging attempts.

In addition to direct attempts at suicide, many prisoners have engaged in prolonged hunger strikes. According to the *New York Times*, “officials said that nine detainees remain on hunger strikes and are being force fed daily.” The article continued: “The longest of those hunger strikers, the officials said, has been force fed for 816 days.” At various times during the past

several years, significant sections of the prisoners have been on hunger strikes.

The regular resort to “self harm” and hunger strikes is a sign of the extraordinary psychological consequences brought on by years of a deliberate policy aimed at inducing a sense of hopelessness and despair.

The web site Wikileaks has made available military documents detailing the standard operating procedure for prisoners at Guantánamo. The documents explain how to isolate prisoners, including from the International Committee of the Red Cross, how to employ guard dogs to intimidate them, and otherwise seek to destroy their will.

According to a 2004 version of the standard operating procedure, prisoners newly brought to Guantánamo Bay are subject to a “Behavior Management Plan.” The purpose of this plan “is to enhance and exploit the disorientation and disorganization felt by a newly arrived detainee in the interrogation process,” the procedure declares. “It concentrates on isolating the detainee and fostering dependence of the detainee on his interrogator.”

The procedure states that all detainees, during their first two weeks at Guantánamo Bay, are to be denied access to the Red Cross. They are also denied all but the most basic requirements for sleeping and cleaning. After this two-week period, the prisoners are kept in isolation until a military commander decides to change their classification. Uncooperative prisoners can be kept in isolation indefinitely.

The 237-page standard operating procedure reads like a blueprint for a Kafkaesque nightmare world in which every component of the prisoner’s life is carefully controlled. There are rules for when and how the detainee may use soap, combs, flip-flops, Styrofoam cups, and all manner of items.

The US military has responded to the desperation of these prisoners by claiming that their suicide attempts are part of a plan to discredit the US government and encourage criticism. After the hangings in June 2006, prison commander Rear Admiral Harry Harris declared, “This was not an act of desperation, but an act of asymmetric warfare committed against us,” while Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy Colleen Graffey called the suicides “a good PR move.”

The military has responded with greater repression. According to an article in the *Los Angeles Times*, “Since three suicides in June last year and one in May, all by hanging, bed linens have been collected each morning to deprive the detainees of any means of making ligatures. Anyone suspected of trying to hurt himself is stripped of all bedding and outfitted in a green quilted ‘suicide smock’ that attaches by Velcro and cannot be shredded.”



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