

Raid by guards triggers clash with Guantanamo inmates

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According to a military press release on Saturday, guards at the infamous US military prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba clashed with inmates conducting a hunger strike as a protest against their indefinite detention and abusive treatment.

The commander of the prison had ordered that hunger strikers be removed from the communal area and placed in single, solid-walled cells. When guards began to move them, hunger strikers fought back with improvised weapons. Guards fired four rounds of nonlethal ammunition to put down the resistance. A military statement said there were no serious injuries.

The press release stated the following about the need for single-cell confinement: “This action was taken in response to efforts by detainees to limit the guard force’s ability to observe the detainees by covering surveillance cameras, windows, and glass partitions. Round-the-clock monitoring is necessary to ensure security, order, and safety.”

Some of the detainees have been on a hunger strike since at least February. Reports vary as to the number of detainees on strike, with the military saying as few as 43 are involved and lawyers for inmates saying that most of the 166 men detained at the camp are participating in the strike. The lawyers say that their clients began the hunger strike to protest searches of their Korans as well as their indefinite confinement.

Carlos Warner, a public defender in Ohio and attorney for one of the inmates, condemned the order to move and isolate the hunger strikers, telling the Associated Press, “[T]his is exactly the opposite of what they should be doing. Instead, the military is escalating the conflict.”

The Pentagon says that guards are prohibited from searching prisoners’ Korans and only cultural officers, most of them Muslims, perform such searches.

Inmates protested the searches of their Korans by asking guards to take them back. Prison authorities would not allow the Korans to be surrendered, because this would amount to conceding that the Korans had been improperly searched in the first place.

Military censorship makes reporting on conditions at the prison difficult. Reuters reported in March that guards at Guantanamo confiscated and deleted a photograph of a detainee holding up a sign protesting his treatment. The International Red Cross, the only nongovernmental institution allowed access to the prison, does not criticize prison authorities or report on the condition of the inmates.

The main source of information from inside the camp in recent months has been attorneys for various detainees. In March, 51 lawyers representing half of the 166 prisoners at the US base sent a protest letter to US Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel.

A gruesome picture emerges from a report by the *Huffington Post* published April 9. Attorney Cori Crider, legal director of Reprieve, told the online publication that her client, 48-year-old Adel Bin Ahmed Bin Ibrahim Hkiml, of Tunisia, attempted suicide while in solitary confinement in March. Hkiml had been on the hunger strike for 43 days. He has been detained at the prison for over 11 years.

Crider said she had not been able to talk to him for some time. She has spoken with attorneys for other inmates, one of whom confirmed Hkiml’s suicide attempt in a letter dated March 19.

The letter described Hkiml’s situation: “[H]e made his suicide attempt while in Camp V. He was taken by the ambulance and we don’t know his whereabouts and whether he died or not. And as of the date of this letter, we still don’t know anything about him.”

A similar letter relayed by an attorney to Crider states

that another detainee, Samir Naji al Hasan Moqbel, had a “minor heart stroke” while being tube-fed on March 19, and was hospitalized.

Crider said: “All clients report several people ‘falling’ daily because of low blood sugar and having to be taken away on stretchers. There is a real risk someone is going seriously to be hurt before this is over. Every client we’ve spoken to says that while the Koran started this mess, indefinite detention of cleared men like them is what keeps it going.”

The *Huffington Post* article also cites a letter from Guantanamo inmate and hunger striker Younus Chekkouri, who, like 85 of his fellow inmates, has been cleared of any involvement in terrorism. His letter offers some of the most horrific details of conditions at the prison.

“The nightmare has started again,” Chekkouri writes. “For some time, things had got a bit better here, some of the guards were acting like human beings. Even if we were treated like sheep, at least we were not always mistreated. But now it has changed again. And now 86 of us have been cleared for release and we are still here. Let us leave Guantanamo with clear hearts, and without hatred. Hatred is evil, and it harms the person who is hating as well as the person who is hated.”

The resistance by the inmates to these conditions by means of a hunger strike, or any measure of collective action, for that matter, is something the overseers of the prison cannot tolerate. As is the case with force-feeding by means of tubes, a practice in violation of international law, the move to break up the Guantanamo inmates’ communal living space and move them to single cells aims to break their will and solidarity.

On Wednesday, Peter Maurer, president of the International Committee of the Red Cross, met with President Barack Obama, who, as a presidential candidate, promised to close the prison at Guantanamo. No press coverage of the meeting was permitted, and Maurer remained button-lipped about the meeting in a press conference on Thursday.

Instead, he used the occasion to provide political cover for the US president, saying the issue of repatriating innocent detainees in Guantanamo was “politically blocked.” Nor did Maurer condemn the illegal practice of forcing feeding tubes through the nasal passages of hunger strikers.



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