

Guantanamo hunger strike, force feedings continue

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At least 100 detainees being held at the Guantanamo prison camp remained on hunger strike Wednesday, a day after President Barack Obama told a White House press briefing that he would “re-engage Congress” on closing the facility.

A spokesman for the US prison at the Guantanamo Bay naval base in southeast Cuba reported Wednesday that 23 of the hunger strikers were being subjected to force feedings and that four of them were being held at the prison hospital.

Many of the detainees are now in the third month of their hunger strike, and their lawyers report that their health has been severely affected and some of them could die. At least two detainees attempted to commit suicide last month.

Asked at his press conference Tuesday whether it was “any surprise, really, that they would prefer death rather than have no end in sight to their confinement,” Obama declared that he continued to believe that the facility should be shut down, saying it was “not necessary,” “expensive” and “inefficient” and that it “hurts us in terms of our international standing.”

In his first presidential campaign in 2008, Obama claimed that he would close down the prison camp during his first year in office. Five years later, 166 individuals remain imprisoned there, most of them having been held for 11 years without charges or trials.

More than half of the detainees—86—have been cleared for release by a task force created by the administration, but it has made no move to free them. Most are Yemeni, and the Obama White House has ordered a freeze on repatriations to Yemen, which has become a battlefield in Washington’s “global war on terror.”

“The idea that we would still maintain forever a group of individuals who have not been tried, that is contrary to who we are,” declared Obama. “We’re now

over a decade out. We should be wiser. We should have more experience in how we prosecute terrorists.”

In point of fact, after a decade, Guantanamo and its methods have become very much part of who “we”, meaning the American state and its military and intelligence apparatus, are. Having failed to close down Guantanamo, Obama has repeatedly signed legislation that has codified its function into US law.

He further lent support to the continued operation of the prison camp by backing off in the face of right-wing political pressure from plans to try Khalid Sheikh Muhammad and four others charged in connection with the 9/11 attacks in a regular federal court. Instead, the administration initiated a military tribunal at Guantanamo, the only major trial to be organized there.

Obama has also signed legislation granting the White House the power to subject anyone, including US citizens, to indefinite military detention without charges on the president’s say-so that they are “terrorist” enemies of the state. As opposed to the Bush administration, however, the Obama presidency has shown a preference for assassinating suspects without charges or trials rather than imprisoning them, while asserting the power to murder American citizens in this fashion.

Moreover, while the task force assembled by Obama in 2009, which included the CIA, FBI and departments of Defense and State, concluded that 56 of the Guantanamo detainees were eligible for transfer out of the facility and another 30 could be transferred so long as certain conditions were met, it ruled that 46 of them should be held indefinitely without charges or trials, a ruling the administration accepted.

While Obama wanted to close down the internationally notorious Guantanamo detention camp, he proposed re-opening a mothballed “super-max”

prison on US soil to serve the same purpose, a public relations gesture that would hardly have altered the conditions that have led 100 men to starve themselves.

Asked about the force feedings of the hunger strikers, Obama endorsed the practice. “I don’t want these individuals to die,” he said. “Obviously, the Pentagon is trying to manage the situation as best as they can.”

Washington fears that if detainees begin dying, it will trigger a wave of anger throughout the world, leading to the storming of American embassies and jeopardizing the interests of US capitalism, particularly in the Middle East.

The measures that it is using to ward off these dangers, however, are tantamount to torture and prohibited under international law and universally recognized medical standards.

Under Guantanamo’s force feeding regimen, US Army guards force detainees into restraint chairs, their heads held immobile with velcro straps. Once the prisoners are strapped in place, Navy medical corpsmen snake feeding tubes through their nostrils, down the backs of their throats and into their stomachs. Then a can of the liquid nutritional supplement Ensure is pumped into the prisoner. Detainees have been held in the restraint chairs for as long as two hours in order to prevent them from regurgitating the liquid.

Lawyers for the detainees have charged that the military has made procedure extremely painful and humiliating in an attempt to break the resistance of the hunger strikers and prevent others from joining the protest. In some cases, unnecessarily wide tubes have been forced down the detainees causing sensations that they described as like being cut with razor blades.

In an April 25 letter to Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel obtained by the *Miami Herald*, the American Medical Association condemned the force feeding at Guantanamo, stating that the practice “violates core ethical values of the medical profession.”

The AMA letter cited the World Medical Association Declaration of Tokyo, which established: “Where a prisoner refuses nourishment and is considered by a physician as capable of forming an unimpaired and rational judgment concerning the consequences of such voluntary refusal of nourishment, he or she shall not be fed artificially.” Military doctors and nurses are supervising this banned practice, serving a similar function as the doctors and psychologists who

collaborated in torture.

Also on Wednesday, the UN’s human rights office equated the force feeding of the Guantanamo inmates with torture and called it a violation of international law.

“If it’s perceived as torture or inhuman treatment—and it’s the case, it’s painful—then it is prohibited by international law,” Rupert Coville, spokesman for the UN high commissioner for human rights, told the AFP news agency.

The number of hunger strikers has more than doubled since it began in February. The increase has been in response to an increasingly repressive regime that lawyers for the detainees say are the worst since the torture regime imposed under the Bush administration.

In February, Army guards, brought in to replace Navy sailors, carried out an abusive shakedown of the detainees, who had covered up surveillance cameras trained on their cells. Legal documents, family photos and even wristwatches that the prison authorities had previously allowed the detainees to wear were confiscated. In the course of these raids, detainees charge that they were physically abused and copies of the Koran were deliberately desecrated.

Then last month, there was a physical confrontation in which guards fired rubber bullets at the detainees. While they previously interacted in communal custody, they have since been on lockdown, confined to their solitary cells for 22 hours a day and, in some cases, around the clock. To the extent they are offered recreation, it consists of being frog-marched in shackles to an exercise cage.

In a statement issued in response to Tuesday’s news conference, the Center for Constitutional Rights, which has represented a number of Guantanamo prisoners, stated: “The President must demonstrate immediate, tangible progress toward the closure of Guantanamo or the men who are on hunger strike will die, and he will be ultimately responsible for their deaths.”

There is no indication that Obama is prepared to take any such action.



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