

Worldwide outrage as Guantanamo hunger strike enters fourth month

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The hunger strike involving more than 100 detainees at the Guantanamo prison camp entered its fourth month this past Monday.

Lawyers for the detainees, most of whom have been held without charges for more than 11 years, said that up to 130 of the 166 detainees remaining at Guantanamo have joined the strike, which began on February 6. US officials admitted that the number was more than 100, nearly two-thirds of the prisoners.

The detainees are being held indefinitely, without being charged or tried. Hope for eventual release is evaporating and their lawyers are unable, after years of fruitless appeals, to give them any reason for optimism.

President Barack Obama has done nothing to carry out his promise to close Guantanamo. The diplomatic office charged with resettling detainees who had been cleared for release was closed several months ago. Military authorities have requested \$200 million for renovating the prison camp, preparing for its use far into the future.

Under these conditions, as US Army Captain Jason Wright, the attorney for several of the detainees, explained, “The hunger strike is a political protest.”

The current protest began to rapidly expand after events of February 6, when the authorities began a noticeably more punitive regime. Guards reportedly confiscated all “comfort items.” A four-page affidavit from one of the detainees, an Afghan, Obaidullah, declares, according to a report in the *Miami Herald*, “When the soldiers conducted their searches, I and other detainees saw US soldiers rifling through the pages of many Qurans and handling them roughly. This constitutes desecration. It has not been searched in five years.”

The British *Independent* newspaper, in its edition of May 5, provided an account, based on first-hand

reports, of the actual conditions at Guantanamo, including the gruesome procedure of force-feeding.

“Twice a day, the 23 most weak are taken into a room,” the newspaper reported. “Their wrists, arms, stomach, legs and head are strapped to a chair and repeated attempts are made to force a tube down their noses to their stomachs. It is an ugly procedure as they gag and wretch, blood dripping from their nostrils.”

The US authorities claim the force-feeding is aimed at preventing suicides, which would deepen the political crisis already facing the US government over the brazen violations of international law that Guantanamo has come to symbolize all over the world.

These techniques are not motivated by the slightest concern for the detainees. Guantanamo inmates have reported that the feeding tubes, instead of being left in, are inserted twice daily for maximum pain and discomfort. These methods are a vindictive effort to punish those participating in the protest and discourage others from joining the hunger strike. In this respect, however, they have been a miserable failure, as the protest grows both in numbers and in worldwide impact.

It has become increasingly clear that many detainees are prepared to starve themselves to death. As one of them, British citizen Shaker Aamer, told his attorney, Clive Stafford Smith, “It is possible that I may die in here. I hope not, but if I do die, please tell my children that I loved them above all else, but that I had to stand up for the principle that they cannot just keep holding people without a trial, especially when they have been cleared for release.”

Jason Wright described his client Obaidullah as a 115-pound “bag of bones.” Obaidullah said he was “losing all hope... 11 years of my life have been taken from me.”

“When I walked into the room he was demonstrably changed,” said Wright. “He said, ‘They won’t treat us with dignity, they are treating us like dogs.’ There is an urgency. It is clear that if this hunger strike continues there will be deaths. These men are going to die in this prison for nothing. It is an absolute outrage.”

Another attorney, Omar Farrah, told *Agence France-Presse* that he was “stunned by how much my clients are resolved” to continue the hunger strike, even in the face of death. “They have nothing to lose,” he said. “They want to live, they want to live with freedom and dignity.”

Shaker Aamer was approved for release more than five years ago. He is among a total of 86 prisoners whom even US authorities admit they have no reason to hold, but who remain in Guantanamo for reasons that are themselves violations of international law and elementary human rights. The White House has refused to release more than 50 Yemeni detainees because of alleged Al Qaeda activity in that country.

A total of 779 detainees have passed through the Guantanamo camp since it opened in January 2002. Almost all of them are guilty of nothing but being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

As Stafford Smith explained, they were captured in Pakistan or Afghanistan and “sold to the Americans for a reward.” They are collateral damage in the effort of the Bush administration, supported by the Democrats and continued by Obama, to give human form to the enemy in the “war on terror.” The US government, both under Bush and Obama, continues to arrogate to itself the right to determine the fate of these men, in a method of imprisonment that recalls the Middle Ages.

Most prisoners are being held in solitary confinement in empty windowless cells, according to the *Independent*. They have been stripped of all possessions and the air conditioning has been turned all the way up to create maximum discomfort. Guards deliberately disturb prayer times and sleeping at night.

Moroccan detainee Younous Chekkouri spoke to his lawyers via telephone, describing sleeping on a concrete floor and using his shoes as a pillow. “Pain starts immediately when I’m on the floor,” he said. “Pain in my neck, pain in my chest. Finally, at night they gave us blankets. It was very cold. Water is now a privilege. They are treating us like animals.”

Many of the detainees have lost about one-third of

their weight. Usually, once this figure reaches 40 percent of normal body weight, starvation sets in, with the body consuming muscles and vital organs.

The determination of the detainees has aroused the anger of millions around the world, while op-ed columns and other statements reflect the growing awareness of the political catastrophe that the prison camp has become for the US government. California Democrat Dianne Feinstein, who earlier had called for a ban on transfers of detainees to Yemen, has now changed her stance and called on Obama to expedite these shifts before the crisis gets any worse.

An online petition is being circulated by Colonel Morris Davis, former chief military prosecutor at Guantanamo. The petition, calling on Obama to either free the detainees or put them on trial, secured more than 137,000 signatures in a few days.

Newspaper editorialists, lawyers and others have called Guantanamo a stain on America’s global image. Whatever the White House and Congress do in the coming weeks and months, however, nothing will erase this stain. It is not against the American people, but against the US ruling class and its obedient servants in both political parties. History will record the barbarism of Guantanamo as a symptom of the economic decay and moral bankruptcy of American capitalism.



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