

US officials will no longer provide information on Guantanamo hunger strikers

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A spokesman for the US military announced this week that the authorities will no longer provide public information on how many prisoners at the American gulag at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba are participating in hunger strikes to protest their indefinite detention.

A report by the Associated Press cited an email from Navy Commander John Filostrat, speaking for the Joint Task Force Command Guantanamo.

“JTF-Guantanamo allows detainees to peacefully protest, but will not further their protests by reporting the numbers to the public,” Filostrat said. “The release of this information serves no operational purpose and detracts from the more important issues, which are the welfare of detainees and the safety and security of our troops.”

The latest policy and its Orwellian defense (“the welfare of the detainees!”) are in some ways the logical extension of the longstanding practice of brutal force-feeding of hunger striking prisoners, in which a nasogastric feeding tube is forced into their stomachs, causing great pain. The practice has been widely denounced as a form of torture (See “Worldwide outrage as Guantanamo hunger strike enters fourth month”)

The American military had earlier concluded that force-feeding was necessary because it feared that deaths caused by the protests would focus greater worldwide attention on the inhuman conditions at Guantanamo, as well as the by now well-known fact that the vast majority of the detainees are guilty of nothing, even by the legally dubious standards of the US “war on terror.”

Apparently the US government has now decided that it would be even more effective to pretend that the remaining 162 prisoners at Guantanamo do not exist.

The current total at Guantanamo is down from a peak

of more than 700 some years ago. In the waning days of the Bush administration measures were taken to reduce the prison population. Under Obama, however, despite the president’s earlier pledge to close Guantanamo, detainee releases have stalled in the past year or two, with only a handful released this year, including two Algerian detainees released this week who had been held without charges for more than a decade.

The two men released on Thursday, Djamel Saïid Ali Ameziane and Belkecem Bensayah, were sent back to Algeria against their will. Their lawyers said they feared persecution and further imprisonment if they were returned to their home country, and urged that they be resettled elsewhere.

Ameziane’s attorney, Wells Dixon of the Center for Constitutional Rights, said, according to an AP dispatch, “Given that the US government well knows that Djamel could have, like dozens of detainees before him, been resettled in a safe, alternate country, it is particularly outrageous that the US would forcibly return him to a risk of harm in Algeria.”

The immediate fate of Ameziane and Bensayah was not clear after their arrival in Algeria. News reports said they were in custody and would appear in court, but did not say what charges they might face. Two of the 14 Algerians repatriated over the years have been jailed on terrorism charges.

Some 80 prisoners have long since been approved for release to Yemen, but US authorities claim that unstable conditions in that country prevent their repatriation.

The ongoing and indefinite detention continues to breed hopelessness among the remaining detainees. This was the source of the mass hunger strike in the first place, which included more than two-thirds of the remaining detainees at its peak. According to what

amounts to the final statement on the subject from the military, the current number of prisoners on hunger strike is 15.

The Obama administration says its hands are tied by Congressional action banning the transfer of any detainees to prisons inside the US. Meanwhile, however, the military has requested \$200 million for renovation of Guantanamo facilities, pointing to preparations for its indefinite use.

Obama's position is part of the pattern of shameless lying by the White House—along with his argument that he can do nothing about the mass deportations of undocumented immigrants. The latter have reached record levels under this administration and provoked a public protest by one young immigrant at an Obama speech in San Francisco last week.

The administration goes into contortions in its attempt to deny responsibility for actions that are seen around the world, quite correctly, as war crimes. The historical record of bipartisan aggression, mass murder and torture will not be erased by such claims, or by the latest maneuver of the Guantanamo authorities.



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