Judge delays order to release Guantanamo force-feeding videos

Patrick Martin
18 October 2014

Ruling on a request filed by the Obama administration, US District Court Judge Gladys Kessler agreed Thursday to grant a one-month delay on the release of videotapes showing the barbaric force-feeding of prisoners at the Guantanamo Bay detention camp.

The tapes also show what are called "cell extractions," in which heavily armed squads of soldiers beat prisoners as they forcibly drag them out of their cells to be strapped into the "five-point restraint" chairs used to implement the force-feedings.

Both of these forms of torture are employed by the US military to punish the political opposition by prisoners at Guantanamo to their open-ended imprisonment without charges or trials, expressed in a series of hunger strikes. More than 100 of the 149 prisoners who remain at the prison camp have participated in these protests over the past two years.

One of the prisoners, Abu Wa'el Dhiab, a Syrian arrested in Pakistan in 2002 and turned over to the US military, has filed suit against the force-feeding. The suit brought to public knowledge the existence of videos, which include tapes of the force-feeding of Dhiab himself on numerous occasions between April 9, 2013 and February 19, 2014.

The tapes of Dhiab alone comprise eleven hours of video during which he screams, gasps, retches and writhes as tubes are forced through his nasal passage and down his throat while he is locked in a restraint chair.

Since this revelation, the Obama administration has combined adamant defense of the practice of force-feeding as "not painful" with an insistence that the tapes of this supposedly humane procedure should not be made public because they would "increase anti-American sentiment and inflame Muslim sensitivities overseas."

In other words, the torturers argue that what they are doing is not torture, while at the same time resisting any public exposure because it would outrage the world.

Kessler's ruling came one day before the deadline she had set at a hearing October 3 for the videos of Dhiab's force-feeding to be turned over to the defense counsel and the media. The tapes would only be released in heavily redacted form, with the faces blurred for all US military personnel involved in force-feeding, extraction and other prison operations.

The Justice Department is expected to use the 30-day delay granted by Kessler to appeal her order for release of the tapes to the Circuit Court of Appeals in Washington DC.

In a court filing Friday, after Kessler had issued the 30-day delay, Dhiab's attorneys again argued that force-feeding is akin to "torture" and urged the judge to order less brutal practices. They said that Dhiab was not hunger striking to death, only protesting his lengthy detention without trial, so force-feeding was not required to save his life. The only purpose of the regimen, they said, was to cause the prisoner "gratuitous pain" as punishment for his public act of protest.

Dhiab was actually cleared for transfer from Guantanamo by the Obama administration, but his repatriation to Syria was barred first by the likelihood that he would be tortured there—evidently the US government reserves the right of torture to itself—and then by the eruption of civil war in 2011. Earlier this year, Uruguay agreed to accept him as part of a group of seven prisoners, but delays on the US side led to a collapse of the deal.

The legal wrangling over the videos of the force-

© World Socialist Web Site

feeding has almost overshadowed the substance of Dhiab's lawsuit, which was to compel the government to halt or alter the method of force-feeding. Dhiab is seeking to have doctors, rather than prison authorities, determine when feeding is necessary, based on the medical condition of the prisoner.

As currently practiced, force-feeding is essentially punitive. Military guards forcibly insert a nasal feeding tube at every meal, as often as three times a day, a process that is both inherently painful and easily abused.

Government attorneys have argued that the longer-term insertion of tubes, for days or weeks, is a security risk, claiming, improbably, that prisoners would pull the tube out, use it to strangle themselves or other detainees "or to fashion into a whip-like weapon."

The Justice Department presented equally paranoid arguments for suppressing the videos, claiming that their release would help enemies develop "countermeasures" or reveal the physical layout of the Guantanamo Bay prison and thus "disrupt good order" there.

A coalition of media organizations has filed briefs supporting the release of the force-feeding videos on the grounds that they are newsworthy and that the government security concerns are specious.

The controversy has put the spotlight once again on the barbaric conditions at Guantanamo. This has been exacerbated by the fact that a majority of the prisoners, 79 out of 149, have been cleared for transfer to other countries and are still kept waiting mainly because of US concern that they would simply be released, given the unstable political conditions in countries like Yemen, which accounts for 58 of the 79.

The Obama administration has transferred only a single prisoner this year, besides the five high-level Taliban prisoners who were exchanged for captured US soldier Bowe Bergdahl.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site