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Guantanamo Detainees on Hunger Strike

Scores of detainees at the U.S. detention facility in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba launched a hunger strike, lawyers and U.S. officials said.

Al Jazeera
September 2, 2005

The prisoners, many of whom have been detained without charge for more than three years, are demanding an immediate trial or release, BBC reported.

Lawyers for the inmates say about 210 men staged a hunger strike three weeks ago. But, U.S. authorities at Guantanamo put the number at 76 and declined to say when the hunger strike started.

In July, at least 52 Guantanamo prisoners staged a hunger strike to protest their "indefinite" detention and "inhumane" treatment. They ended their protest when the U.S. military agreed to talk to them.

The detainees have now restarted the hunger strike, accusing U.S. officials of reneging on their promises, amid accusations of mistreatment at the detention camp.

Lawyers also say one inmate wrote a will in anticipation of starving to death.

Gitanjali Gutierrez, of the New York-based Center for Constitutional Rights, a non-profit legal organization representing some of Guantanamo detainees, said the Pentagon had denied them proper legal access.

"Since January 2002, the (Defense Department) has denied prisoners access to the courts or legal counsel in an effort to avoid justifying the basis for the detentions," Gutierrez told the AFP news agency.

"This policy has driven detainees to strike until they die or are afforded a fair hearing and humane treatment," he added.

Pentagon changes Guantanamo tribunals

On Thursday, the U.S. military announced changes to the military commissions that will try Guantanamo detainees to make the trial "more like a judge and jury model", the AFP reported.

The Pentagon said in a statement that the changes will make the tribunal's presiding officers act "more like a judge", while positioning other panel members more like a jury.

It added that the defendant will be present at his trial when necessary to protect classified information, and when the presiding officer rules that admitting such information would not render the trial unfair.

The Center for Constitutional Rights strongly criticized the new changes, describing them as "purely semantics and window dressing" that "do not provide for substantive improvements or access to fair and open hearings".

The United States is holding more than 500 foreign suspects at Guantanamo prison. Only four have been charged.

The Pentagon said in July that it will resume trials by military tribunals of four prisoners and bring charges against eight more. But it insisted that other inmates will be held without charges as "enemy combatants".

Human rights organizations and several EU states have said that "enemy combatants" is a term not recognized by international law, and that prisoners should be granted the rights of prisoners of wars.