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Gitmo Detainees Being Left to Die: Lawyer

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Arab News
September 24, 2005

WASHINGTON - The 550 foreign detainees being held in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, by the US government, are just being stockpiled there until they die, charged the American lawyer of 11 Kuwaiti citizens there in an exclusive interview with Arab News.

"The government is warehousing them at Guantanamo until they die," said Kristine Huskey.

The detainees are suspected of terror links to the Al-Qaeda network or Afghanistan's ousted Taliban regime, and some of them have been there for four years now.

A group of approximately 130 prisoners went on a hunger strike a few weeks ago to protest their dire conditions in which they were not allowed to exercise in their cells and were fed inappropriate food. The number of prisoners still refusing food went down to 103 last week, with several of them hospitalized and forcibly fed with tubes to prevent them from dying.

Huskey and her colleague Tom Wilner filed and received a court order allowing them to visit clients at the base.

Huskey told Arab News that five of their clients began a hunger strike on Aug. 8, and are now gaunt and weak.

"The main reason they began this hunger strike is because they feel after almost four years at Guantanamo, it's hopeless. They see it as a peaceful protest to the lack of justice there they're asking to be charged and be given a fair trial, or released. They say if they've done something wrong, they want to stand trial for it, if not, to be released. They want to be treated with dignity, and be treated like human beings," said Huskey.

She said two of her clients have been hospitalized, and are being forced-fed with a feeding tube in their nose to the stomach.

This was Huskey's sixth visit to Gitmo since a court order allowed her first trip in December. Those on hunger strikes had lost an average of over 30 pounds.

"The two men in the hospital are skin and bones; one cannot walk without the assistance of his guards. They feel hopeless there, and believe they're not going to get justice."

Their fears may be justified. Matthew Waxman, deputy assistant secretary of defense for detainee affairs recently told reporters: "The war on terrorism is going to be a long war."

Waxman said the Pentagon has identified about a dozen ex-Guantanamo detainees who were released, only to turn up again on the Afghanistan battlefield to fight Americans, saying they had fooled their US screeners.

"Many of the people at Guantanamo, the detainees, have received sophisticated training in counter-interrogation techniques," he said. "Many of them have fabricated cover stories."

Huskey admits this attitude presents a huge problem for the lawyers and their clients.

“When I first took this case three years ago, people didn’t want to listen. They didn’t care because the Muslim culture is strange to a lot of people who live in America, and also because the bitterness remaining from the terrorist attacks of 9/11.”

“The feeling is that all those men in Guantanamo are Arab Muslims, they’re all bad, and they don’t deserve any rights. No one seemed to care if they got a trial, lawyers or even due process,” said Huskey who lived as a teenager in Saudi Arabia where her father worked for Aramco in Dhahran.

“Another problem,” she said, “is that the troops overseeing the Gitmo prison, clearly have no idea of the (Muslim) culture or religion.”

The Marines and sailors are very nice, and they’re there to do a job, but they’re not being taught much about the detainees.

The lawyers have constant military escorts while on the base, and she said security has become tighter since her first visits. I even get followed when I use the restroom.

But their visits have resulted in improved conditions for the prisoners, including dental visits, exercise and better food.

Huskey said some military personnel she met expressed discomfort with their duties there.

“When we first started on this case; many of the military personnel we met felt very strongly that the Geneva Conventions should be applied. They still are very divided. Some feel that holding the detainees without charges or a trial are not in accordance with the Geneva conventions and is wrong and goes against what the US military has practiced historically.”

“At Guantanamo it’s a hard job for them,” said Huskey about the military personnel working with the detainees. “Because of what the government is asking them to do which is to conduct themselves in a way that is not consistent with their military beliefs about how POWs should be treated.”