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Red Cross Says Guantanamo List May be Some Families' First Confirmation

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Associated Press
April 20, 2006

GENEVA (AP) - The list of 558 detainee names released by the Pentagon may provide some families with the first confirmation in four years that their relatives are being held in the U.S. military prison in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, the international Red Cross said Thursday.

Delegates of the International Committee of the Red Cross have organized the exchange of more than 20,000 private messages between Guantanamo detainees and their families since the naval base started to be used for captives in January 2002, but it is possible some detainees refused to use the service, said ICRC chief spokeswoman Antonella Notari.

"I don't know of specific cases, but theoretically a prisoner has no obligation to correspond with anybody," Notari said. "That's his free choice."

The ICRC, which is mandated by the Geneva Conventions to visit prisoners of war, is the only outside agency the United States allows to visit the Guantanamo detainees and check on their conditions. The neutral agency refuses to disclose specifics about its contacts with detainees, but does discuss problems with captors in hopes of improving the situation.

"We are visiting on a regular basis all of the people held in Guantanamo Bay in total accord with our modalities -- private talks, repeat visits, private Red Cross message exchange and the whole thing," Notari told The Associated Press.

Red Cross messages, which are delivered by hand to the detainees and their families, are intended for the exchange of personal and family news, and detainees are allowed to say where they are being held, but U.S. authorities may censor the messages to remove long political statements and other departures, she said.

"This corresponds to standard worldwide practice wherever the ICRC visits places of detention," the agency says.

The list released under court order to The Associated Press on Wednesday included the names and nationalities of current and former Guantanamo detainees. There are now about 490 detainees from about 40 countries at the base.