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## **U.S. Activists Rebuffed In Bid to Enter Guantanamo Base**

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HAVANA (AP) - U.S. activists camping at a Cuban military checkpoint outside the U.S. naval base at Guantanamo Bay were rebuffed in their bid to gain access to terror suspects held at the facility.

Members of the Christian-oriented Witness Against Torture began a hunger strike at the checkpoint on Monday after a five-day march from the eastern Cuban city of Santiago.

They said they have not received a reply to their formal request to gain access to the base. On Tuesday one of the activists, Gary Ashbeck, called the base on a cell phone, only to have communication cut off after a brief exchange with an operator.

"We demand that prisoners at Guantanamo be treated with dignity," the group said in a statement read to reporters on Tuesday.

Stacey Byington, a civilian spokeswoman for U.S. Naval Station Guantanamo Bay, told The Associated Press in an e-mail that access is limited to those with official or authorized business.

Three of the 25 American activists headed home Tuesday, but 22 others continued a water-only fast at the Cuban military checkpoint, which lies about eight kilometers (five miles) outside the U.S. base. The three said they had to leave because of prior commitments, but those left behind continued the protest.

"(We are going) to spread the word that people are being tortured at Guantanamo," said Patricia Santoro, of Jersey City, New Jersey, during a stop in Havana. "It isn't a myth, like most Americans believe. Our government has disgraced us, and I will tell everyone I see and know about this experience."

The detention center has become a symbol of the controversy over detainee abuse by the U.S. military. Thirty-two prisoners are on hunger strike to protest what they say is cruel and inhumane treatment.

Twenty-five of those prisoners are being fed through tubes.

U.S. officials insist the hundreds of prisoners held at Guantanamo are treated humanely at the remote base on Cuba's eastern tip. The government says they are enemy combatants, not prisoners of war, and are not entitled to the same rights afforded under the Geneva Conventions.

Jackie Allen of Hartford, Connecticut, said she has been "horrified" by the actions of the U.S. government and

urged Americans to protest.

"We hope this is a ripple in the pond, and that the ripples will grow and go on and on, so that there's a movement for the abolition of torture," said Allen, also returning home Tuesday.

The activists, who arrived in Cuba via the Dominican Republic, said they were not concerned about possible sanctions they might face at home for traveling to Cuba, which is under a decades-old U.S. trade and travel embargo.

"I'm not afraid of reprisals," said Rev. Steve Kelly, a Jesuit priest from California. "It's my job to be with the poor and the oppressed."