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U.S. military defends Afghan detentions

Associated Press
February 26, 2006

KABUL, Afghanistan - The U.S. military on Sunday defended its detention of about 500 inmates at its main base in Afghanistan, saying they are treated humanely and provided the "best possible living conditions."

The New York Times on Sunday reported that inmates are held by the dozen in wire cages at the Bagram Air Base, north of Kabul - some for as long as two or three years without access to lawyers or the chance to hear the allegations against them.

The report, citing unnamed military officials and former detainees, said that inmate numbers had grown sharply, partly because "enemy combatants" caught during the hunt for al-Qaida and Taliban militants in Afghanistan were no longer being transferred to the U.S. prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

Col. James Yonts, the U.S. military spokesman in Kabul, would not confirm or deny whether inmates are held for up to three years, saying the secretary of defense sets the criteria for detention. But he added that all those held were at one time "enemy combatants" and their status is regularly reviewed.

"We hold them for two reasons: to question them and get intelligence from them, or because they've committed violence against the coalition or the people of Afghanistan," he said in an e-mailed response to questions.

"We regularly review the status of the detainees, and if a detainee has no intelligence value and if we believe he will no longer attack the coalition or forces of the central government, we will release him. We regularly release detainees," he said.

Yonts confirmed about 500 people are currently held at Bagram, and said they were treated humanely and "provided the best possible living conditions and medical care in accordance with the principals of the Geneva Convention."

The U.S. military maintains that "enemy combatants" are not covered by the Geneva Conventions on treatment of prisoners of war.

The military has not allowed Afghan and international human rights groups access to the Bagram Detention Facility, although it does allow the International Committee of the Red Cross to visit the prisoners.

The Times report described conditions as "primitive." It cited military figures as saying numbers of detainees at Bagram had risen from about 100 at the start of 2004 to as many as 600 at times last year.

It said the increase was partly a result of a decision by the U.S. government to shut off the flow of detainees to Guantanamo after the U.S. Supreme Court ruled those prisoners had some basic due-process rights. The report said the question of whether those same rights apply to detainees in Bagram has not been tested in court.