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Lawyer for Guantanamo Prisoner Asks Judge to Halt Force-Feeding Practices

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SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico (AP) - A lawyer defending a Guantanamo Bay prisoner said Tuesday he has asked a U.S. federal judge to immediately ban the use of restraint chairs and other aggressive methods to force-feed hunger strikers at the detention center, alleging they violate a new U.S. ban on torture.

Defense attorney Rick Murphy said his client, Muhammed Bawazir of Yemen, was subjected to a "daily ritual of pain and humiliation" to halt his participation in the hunger strike at the U.S. military base in eastern Cuba, where some 490 men suspected of links to al-Qaida or the Taliban are held.

In papers filed Monday in federal court in Washington, Murphy said the use of restraints, larger nasal feeding tubes and other practices at Guantanamo violates the McCain Amendment, which prohibits torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment of prisoners. The law, adopted in December, was sponsored by Republican Sen. John McCain, who was a POW for almost five years in North Vietnam and was tortured.

Murphy asked U.S. District Judge Gladys Kessler to prohibit the use of the restraint chair and large feeding tubes if Bawazir resumes the hunger strike. He dropped out of the protest in January after more than 140 days of refusing to eat.

The Department of Defense, meanwhile, prepared for hearings Wednesday for two Guantanamo prisoners. Sufyan Barhoumi, an Algerian, is accused of providing explosives training to al-Qaida members. Ali Hamza Ahmad Sulayman al Bahlul, a Yemeni, is accused of being al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden's bodyguard.

Both hearings will likely include the setting of trial schedules, and the men may enter pleas, said Maj. Jane Boomer, a spokeswoman for the Office of Military Commissions.

Navy Capt. Tom Quinn told reporters at the base Tuesday that the United States plans to release 14 prisoners and transfer another 119 to authorities in their home countries, reducing the prison population by about 30 percent.

Quinn he did not specify when the prisoners would be released or transferred. The planned reductions were first reported by the Department of Defense in a Feb. 9 statement.

The military said the hunger strike began in August with 76 detainees protesting their confinement and grew to as many as 131 prisoners in mid-September. Defense lawyers say the figures have been higher. On Tuesday, the U.S. said five detainees were on strike, including three being force-fed.

Attorneys for several prisoners have alleged the military sought to end the strike in January by taking more aggressive measures against detainees, including the use of a special restraint chair and the use of thicker feeding tubes that are repeatedly removed and reinserted -- rather than allowing them to remain in place between the forced meals.

The Department of Defense says it uses methods to feed the strikers that are the same as those allowed in U.S. civilian prisons.