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Lawyers for Gitmo Detainees Say Forced-Feeding Caused Drop in Hunger Strike

BEN FOX
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SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico (AP) - A lawyer for detainees at Guantanamo Bay said Thursday that the military has used increasingly harsh methods, including strapping prisoners to a special chair, to force-feed those on hunger strike and persuade them to end their protest.

Military personnel have strapped the striking detainees into a "restraint chair" to aggressively force-feed hunger strikers, Tom Wilner said. The attorney returned from the prison at the U.S. base in eastern Cuba last week and had his notes declassified by the government late Wednesday.

The harsher methods, Wilner said, began in December and included the removal of so-called comfort items like blankets from the prisoners.

The lawyer said this new treatment is the reason the number of strikers has dropped to four from several dozen at the end of 2005.

"That's what stopped the hunger strike," said Wilner, who represents six prisoners from Kuwait including one who has resumed eating after starting the protest in August. "They purposely force-fed these people to end the strike."

A spokesman for the detention center did not immediately return a phone call Thursday seeking comment about the alleged use of the restraint chair.

But the military said Wednesday that it has not changed how it handles the hunger strikers. Four detainees are now refusing food, including three who are being force-fed -- the lowest number since the strike began in August.

"We haven't changed anything. Our processes and procedures are the same," said Lt. Col. Jeremy Martin, a spokesman for the detention center. "But the numbers have fluctuated."

All four prisoners on strike are in stable condition, according to Martin, who declined to speculate why detainees may have chosen to drop out of the protest.

The military said the strike began with 76 detainees protesting their confinement at the remote, high-security prison in Cuba and the number joining the protest reached 131 in mid-September. Defense lawyers say the figures have been higher.

One possible reason for the discrepancy is that the military defines a hunger strike as missing nine consecutive meals, but some detainees may eat just enough to avoid that classification so they won't be force-fed, said Julia Tarver Mason, a lawyer for 13 Saudis at the prison camp.

Prisoners participating in the hunger strike have alleged in court documents that the feeding tubes have been roughly inserted and withdrawn in an abusive manner -- an allegation the military has denied.

Mason, who represents one prisoner still on strike, said the four are protesting on behalf of other detainees at Guantanamo.

"It's not about the numbers," she said. "I don't think it's a situation in which some people have gone off the strike because they believe conditions have improved at Guantanamo."

The United States is holding some 500 people on suspicion of links to al-Qaida or Afghanistan's ousted Taliban government.

Stephen Oleskey, a defense attorney who visited the base last month, said some of his clients, Algerians who were arrested in Bosnia, told him they had seen hunger strikers who were "emaciated" and needed help to walk.

Martin, who called the protest an "al-Qaida tactic" to elicit media attention and to pressure the U.S. government, said the strikers have access to the International Committee of the Red Cross and are permitted to send and receive mail.