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Guantanamo Prison Marks Fourth Anniversary; No End in Sight for Detainees

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GUANTANAMO BAY NAVAL BASE, Cuba (AP) - Four years ago Wednesday, the first 20 prisoners detained in the U.S. fight against terrorism arrived shackled and blindfolded at this U.S. Naval base along Cuba's eastern edge.

The prison has grown to include five buildings holding 500 prisoners. With only nine of the detainees charged with crimes, allegations of abuse and a hunger strike under way, controversy about the facility has also grown.

"These are people who are sitting there who everyday are waiting for something to happen ... and they have not had an opportunity to (contest) the fact that they're being detained," said Katherine Newell Bierman of Human Rights Watch, adding that some detainees may be innocent.

The U.S. has set up a board to review each prisoner's status annually to see if he still needs to be held, but the Geneva Convention and laws of war allow the U.S. to hold the prisoners until the conflict's end, said Maj. Jane Boomer, a spokeswoman for the Office of Military Commissions.

"They're not being detained for criminal prosecution. They're being detained to be kept off the battlefield," Boomer said.

Army Lt. Col. Jeremy M. Martin disagreed that the detainees have been plunged into a black hole indefinitely.

"We don't plan to keep any detainees one day longer than they're a security threat to the United States or our allies," Martin said.

The United Nations and human rights groups have said the number of hunger strikers at Guantanamo was a sign of despair by detainees who have lost hope of ever knowing their fate.

Forty-two prisoners are on a hunger strike this week. Thirty-two of them were being fed by a tube. Some hunger strikers have previously alleged that U.S. troops inserted the tubes without using anesthesia or sedatives to minimize pain, and that tubes were reused without being cleaned.

Martin said the feeding was "involuntary" but prisoners "don't resist" it. He also said there was no abuse or torture at the prison.

About 4,000 soldiers guard Guantanamo -- twice the number there before the Sept. 11 attacks. The detainees, many captured in the Afghanistan war, live in one of five prison sites, ranging from a communal living format to a maximum security setting.

Of the 750 prisoners brought to Guantanamo since 2002, the military has released 180. It has also transferred another 76 to the custody of other countries, such as Australia, the United Kingdom, Kuwait, Pakistan, Russia and Saudi Arabia.