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Defense Team Outnumbered in Gitmo Trials

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GUANTANAMO BAY NAVAL BASE, Cuba (AP) - Prosecutors outnumber defense lawyers 4-to-1 at military trials for terror suspects at Guantanamo Bay, the chief defense counsel said, arguing that his team needs more staff.

The U.S. prosecution team has 17 members compared to four military defense attorneys, said Marine Col. Dwight Sullivan after a hearing Thursday involving a Canadian teenager accused of killing a U.S. medic during fighting in Afghanistan.

"We have nine cases. So clearly we need more personnel resources," Sullivan said. "Obviously there's quite an imbalance between the prosecutor's office and our office."

Sullivan said two civilian attorneys would join their team and they were attempting to mobilize a number of Army reserve lawyers to join the defense office over the next few months.

"We are one claimant on a very limited pool of resources and we have been advocating for more resources," he said.

But Maj. Jane Boomer, a spokeswoman for the Office of Military Commissions, disputed that there was such an imbalance.

She said the defense had help from law school volunteers, among other things, and that both sides provided strong representation during this week's proceedings. She also questioned the figure of 17 prosecutors, but provided no alternate number.

Sullivan said the difference in the size of the teams was partly due to the fact that litigation in U.S. courts challenging the Guantanamo proceedings have held up the commissions, or trials. Lawyers assigned to the defense team left during that time.

"We're playing catch up," he said.

His comments came after pretrial hearings Wednesday and Thursday for two detainees.

In one case, that of Yemeni prisoner Ali Hamza Ahmad Sulayman al Bahlul, the presiding officer said the prosecution team had four lawyers and the defense had a single attorney.

Al Bahlul said he was boycotting the proceedings because he couldn't appoint an attorney of his choice. Maj. Tom Fleener, al Bahlul's military counsel, attempted to withdraw as the detainee's attorney, saying it was clear he was not wanted.

The presiding officer, Army Col. Peter E. Brownback denied the request, saying al Bahlul was required to have a military lawyer.

Al Bahlul is charged with conspiring with al-Qaida members to commit war crimes, including attacking civilians. Prosecutors charge that al Bahlul was ordered by Osama bin Laden to create a video glorifying the group's October 2000 attack on the destroyer USS Cole in Yemen that killed 17 American sailors.

In the second case, 19-year-old Omar Ahmed Khadr's military counsel requested a more experienced military lawyer to join their team. The Toronto-born prisoner is charged with murder, attempted murder, aiding the enemy and conspiracy.

Khadr, the son of an alleged al-Qaida financial leader, Ahmad Said al-Khadr, was captured on July 27, 2002, near Khost in eastern Afghanistan. He was caught after being badly wounded in a firefight in which an American soldier was killed and four others were wounded.

The detention center in Cuba's eastern tip opened Jan. 11, 2002, after the U.S.-led force ousted the Taliban regime in Afghanistan for harboring bin Laden. Only nine of the roughly 500 detainees at naval base have been charged after years in detention.