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U.S. Told Not to Force-Feed Detainees

Doctors from around the world called the Guantanamo practice degrading and unethical.

David Stringer
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Doctors from around the world yesterday urged the U.S. military to stop force-feeding detainees on hunger strikes at the Guantanamo Bay prison camp, calling the procedure "degrading and unethical."

In a letter to The Lancet medical journal, 263 doctors from Britain, Ireland, the United States, Germany, Australia, Italy and the Netherlands also appealed to the American Medical Association, which endorses a World Medical Association ban on the force-feeding of patients.

The World Medical Association says a prisoner should not be forcibly fed if a doctor believes he is capable of "unimpaired and rational judgment" to refuse treatment.

"Doctors force-feeding prisoners at Guantanamo are acting as an arm of the military," said William Hopkins, a psychiatrist at Barnet Hospital in London and a signatory to the letter. "It is degrading and unethical to do this to people in detention."

Since the prison camp opened in January 2002 at the U.S. naval base in Cuba, scores of prisoners accused of links to Afghanistan's ousted Taliban militia or the al-Qaeda terror network have waged hunger strikes to protest their indefinite detentions. Many of the 490 men at Guantanamo have been held for four years without charge.

Six detainees now are on a hunger strike at the prison, a U.S. military spokesman, Lt. Col. Jeremy Martin, said yesterday. Three are being forcibly fed through tubes inserted into their nostrils.

The feeding of hunger strikers is carried out in a "humane and compassionate manner," only when necessary and "through lawful clinical means," Martin, based at Guantanamo, said in an e-mailed response to questions.

Some countries have had a policy of nonintervention in hunger strikes, including Britain, which in 1981 allowed 10 Irish Republican Army prisoners to die.