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Guantanamo struggling with population boom

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GUANTANAMO BAY NAVAL BASE, Cuba - The arrival of hundreds of terror suspects at this remote U.S. naval outpost has produced a population boom and a flood of amenities - a miniature golf course, Starbucks coffee, concerts and a planned go-cart track.

The non-detainee population at the Caribbean base has surged from 2,600 to about 9,500 since the military brought in the first prisoners from the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan three years ago.

Commanders at a post that was little more than a refueling stop for warships began renovating abandoned structures and building new ones in a rush to provide working and living quarters for the 2,200 personnel of the detention operation as well as their family members, contract workers, interrogators and other support officials.

Uncertainty shrouds the future of the prison after court rulings undermined the government's argument that 545 detainees from 40 countries are beyond the reach of the U.S. legal system and are not entitled to the same protections as prisoners of war held under the Geneva Conventions.

Still, construction continues under the assumption that most detainees are not leaving soon.

"As long as there is a global war on terror, (the detention mission) is here for the long run," said the base's commander, Navy Capt. Les McCoy, who does not oversee the prison but must take its future into account. "The Navy realized it hadn't paid attention to Guantanamo. Now they are looking at us."

Two permanent prison camps that can hold 320 inmates are meant to replace four temporary jails, suggesting the military hopes gradually to release or transfer many prisoners through parole hearings or negotiations with their home governments. One prison was completed last year and work has started on a \$35 million facility.

With nearly every building on the base in use, finding adequate housing for troops and other support staff has been a headache.

Many officers live in housing that had been boarded up, overrun with rodents known as "banana rats" and on the brink of demolition.

Enlisted personnel are crowded into windowless trailers in a district dubbed "Camp America." It is closer to the prison camp than to the base's social center, which has the only McDonald's in Cuba.

The military hopes eventually to move troops to more permanent housing "downtown," said Cmdr. Anne Marie Reese, an engineer overseeing construction for the detention mission.

"Everyone wants to feel like they are going home after work," Reese said. "Whether we can achieve that 100 percent remains to be seen."

Hunkered behind a 17-mile fence at the southeastern end of communist Cuba, Guantanamo is one of the most isolated U.S. naval stations in the world. The parched land and blistering heat reinforces a sleepy atmosphere.

The population surge has meant more parties, sold-out country and rock concerts and - the latest excitement - Starbucks coffee sold at four kiosks, which have been selling about 1,400 cups a day since opening earlier this month.

"Oddly enough it did lift my morale," said Petty Officer Barry Tate, who stopped for his first cup of the day at a Starbucks kiosk near the movie theater. "I didn't expect to see it and here it was. It reminds me of home."

The new miniature golf course has not been much of a hit, probably because it is covered in brown grass and has no obstacles. But not for long, promised Craig Basel, who is in charge of recreation at the base. By summer, obstacles will include replicas of guard towers and banana rats, he said.

A go-cart track is coming in July.

About the only structure on the base facing demolition is Camp X-ray, the now vine-overgrown outdoor jail where detainees were kept in chain-link cages during the operation's first four months.

"X-ray is history," said Reese. "No one has any plans to use it for anything."