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U.S. Frees 85 Afghans From Military Jails

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Associated Press
May 1, 2005

KABUL, Afghanistan -- The U.S. military released 85 Afghans from its jails in Afghanistan on Sunday after deciding they posed no threat and hearing them swear loyalty to the government.

Seventy men were brought from the main American base at Bagram to the capital and freed after a closed-door ceremony, Rahmat Nadim, an Afghan intelligence service official, told The Associated Press.

Fifteen more were released from a base near the southern city of Kandahar, where they received gifts and cash as well as a warning not to side with Taliban militants.

"We hope you will go back to your families, live a quiet life and not cooperate with the Taliban," Kandahar Gov. Gul Agha Sherzai told the men before they were released. "If you work with the government and the coalition, your country will progress."

There was no apology for the 15 released in Kandahar, but the governor handed each of them \$234 and a new turban as well as a letter from the U.S. military confirming their release.

American forces have detained thousands of people since entering Afghanistan in 2001 to oust the former Taliban government and end the country's role as a haven and training ground for al-Qaida militants after the Sept. 11 terror attacks.

Most have been released, but many others have spent years in the U.S. jail for terror suspects at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, or in rough military jails across Afghanistan, especially the holding facility at Bagram, where several have complained they were abused by U.S. soldiers.

Sunday's group release was one of the largest yet and came after 17 Afghans arrived home from Guantanamo on April 19.

A U.S. spokeswoman said it was the result of a regular review rather than any drive to reduce the number of people held at the American bases.

"They said they would be committed to the government and were deemed to no longer pose a threat to the government of the coalition," Lt. Cindy Moore told AP.

The U.S. military had been holding about 600 prisoners prior to Sunday's release, Moore said.

Most of the prisoners were from the south, southeast or southwest of the country, where the 18,000-strong U.S.-led combat force focuses its operations against Taliban-led insurgents.

Nadim said they had been in custody for between three months and nearly three years.

"They were detained for a variety of crimes, some of them perhaps based on mistaken intelligence," Nadim said.

Mohammed Wali, who said he was 15, said he was detained three months earlier along with his father-in-law when Afghan and U.S. forces burst into his house in Uruzgan province.

He said Afghan troops beat him when he was seized but that he had suffered no abuse in American custody.

"At first, they questioned me night and day about the Taliban and weapons," Wali told AP. "I told them I had nothing to do with the Taliban."