

The following text may be printed, copy/pasted, or downloaded and emailed.

Experts Want Access to Guantanamo Inmates

Associated Press
October 31, 2005

UNITED NATIONS - U.N. human rights investigators warned on Monday that they would snub a long-sought invitation to visit U.S. detention facilities at Guantanamo Bay if they are barred access to terrorist suspects being held there. The Pentagon on Thursday invited three of the experts to visit the detention facilities at the U.S. military base in Cuba. But while the experts said they were happy the invitation finally came after more than three years of requests, they would not go if they cannot interview the prisoners.

"It makes no sense (to go)," Manfred Nowak, special investigator on torture and other cruel treatment, told a press conference at U.N. headquarters in New York. "You cannot do a fact-finding mission without talking to the detainees."

The U.S. Department of Defense (website) declined to invite two experts with the United Nations Commission on Human Rights who also sought to go, drawing an angry reaction from one.

"I am informed that hunger strikers are being force-fed in a brutal manner bordering on the sadistic," said Paul Hunt, special investigator on the right to health. "The best way for me to check the accuracy of these and other allegations ... is to visit, see the conditions for myself, to talk privately with detainees."

"I am extremely disappointed that the authorities continue to deny me access to Guantanamo Bay," Hunt said in a statement.

Nowak said pointedly that even China, which has a poor record of treatment of prisoners, has agreed to an inspection of Chinese prisons, including interviews with detainees.

The Austrian investigator, however, refused to compare the willingness of the United States and China to hold their treatment of prisoners up to scrutiny.

Nowak and Leila Zerrougi, chairperson of the world body's working group on arbitrary detention, said they and fellow investigator Asma Jahangir would visit Guantanamo on Dec. 6 - but only if U.S. authorities permit them to interview detainees in private.

They said the Pentagon's letters of invitation specified they would not be granted access to detainees.

"They say they have nothing to hide," Nowak said. "If they have nothing to hide, why should we not be able to speak with detainees?"

The investigators said they have also asked the United States and Iraq for access to Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad, but have received no response.

Also excluded from the invitation to Guantanamo was Leandro Despouy, an expert on the independence of judges and lawyers.

The Guantanamo detention center has become a symbol of the controversy over detainee abuse by the U.S. military. About two dozen prisoners are on hunger strikes to protest what they say is cruel and inhumane treatment.

U.S. officials insist the hundreds of prisoners held at Guantanamo are treated humanely. So far, only the International Committee of the Red Cross has been allowed to visit the detainees - who the U.S. says are "enemy combatants" picked up in the U.S.-led war on terror.

The Pentagon's invitation was important "given the history of mistreatment at Guantanamo," said Kenneth Roth, executive director of the New York-based organization Human Rights Watch.

But because the investigators cannot interview detainees, it is a "clearly inadequate offer" amounting to no more than a "show tour," he said.