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At Guantanamo, a Prison Within a Prison

CIA Has Run a Secret Facility for Some Al Qaeda Detainees, Officials Say

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Within the heavily guarded perimeters of the Defense Department's much-discussed Guantanamo Bay prison in Cuba, the CIA has maintained a detention facility for valuable al Qaeda captives that has never been mentioned in public, according to military officials and several current and former intelligence officers.

The buildings used by the CIA are shrouded by high fences covered with thick green mesh plastic and ringed with floodlights, officials said. They sit within the larger Camp Echo complex, which was erected to house the Defense Department's high-value detainees and those awaiting military trials on terrorism charges.

The facility has housed detainees from Pakistan, West Africa, Yemen and other countries under the strictest secrecy, the sources said. "People are constantly leaving and coming," said one U.S. official who visited the base in recent months. It is unclear whether the facility is still in operation today. The CIA and the Defense Department declined to comment.

Most international terrorism suspects in U.S. custody are held not by the CIA but by the Defense Department at the Guantanamo Bay prison. They are guaranteed access to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and, as a result of a U.S. Supreme Court ruling this year, have the right to challenge their imprisonment in federal courts.

CIA detainees, by contrast, are held under separate rules and far greater secrecy. Under a presidential directive and authorities approved by administration lawyers, the CIA is allowed to capture and hold certain classes of suspects without accounting for them in any public way and without revealing the rules for their treatment. The roster of CIA prisoners is not public, but current and former U.S. intelligence officials say the agency holds the most valuable al Qaeda leaders and many mid-level members with knowledge of the group's logistics, financing and regional operations.

The CIA facility at the Guantanamo Bay prison was constructed over the past year as the agency confronted one of its toughest emerging problems: where to hold terrorists for interrogations that could last for years.

During the 1990s, the CIA typically had custody of half a dozen terrorists at any time and usually kept them in foreign prisons, mostly in Egypt and Jordan. But just two months after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, CIA paramilitary teams working with foreign intelligence services had arrested dozens of people thought to have knowledge of upcoming attacks on the United States.

The CIA is believed to be holding about three dozen al Qaeda leaders in undisclosed locations, U.S. national security officials say. Among them are pivotal Sept. 11 plotters Khalid Sheik Mohammed, Ramzi Binalshibh and Abu Zubaida and the leader of Southeast Asia's Islamic terrorist movement, Nurjaman Riduan Isamuddin, who is also known as Hambali.

CIA detention facilities have been located on an off-limits corner of the Bagram air base in Afghanistan, on ships at sea and on Britain's Diego Garcia island in the Indian Ocean.

Maintaining facilities in foreign countries is difficult, however, said current and former CIA officials. Binalshibh and Abu Zubaida were believed to have been taken to Thailand immediately after capture. The Thai government eventually insisted that they be transferred elsewhere.

"People are willing to help but not to hold," said one CIA veteran of counterterrorism operations.

The U.S. base at Guantanamo Bay thus provided the CIA with an isolated venue devoid of the sensitive international politics. But it came with strings attached.

The U.S. military, which controls the base, required the agency to register all detainees, abide by military detention standards and permit the ICRC some level of access.

"If you're going to be in my back yard, you're going to have to abide by my rules" is how one defense official explained it.

Army officials investigating the Abu Ghraib prison scandal concluded that the CIA had held "ghost detainees" at the prison, inmates who were not registered or officially acknowledged, a violation of military rules.

Asked about the arrangement with the CIA at Guantanamo Bay, Pentagon spokesman Bryan Whitman said he could not comment on operations of other agencies. "As we have stated since the beginning of detention operations at Guantanamo, the ICRC has access to detainees at Guantanamo and is permitted to meet with them, consistent with military necessity," Whitman said in a statement. Pentagon policy "is that all [Defense] detainees, including those at Guantanamo, are treated humanely, and in accordance with applicable law," the statement continued.

One U.S. official knowledgeable about the arrangement with the ICRC considered it a positive step forward. "There is no one in Gitmo who is not identified," he said, using Guantanamo Bay's nickname.

Red Cross officials declined to say where they had been permitted to visit, or whom. "We have been granted broad access to the camp," the ICRC said in a prepared statement. "We are confident we have visited all of the people detained at Guantanamo, in all of the places they are being detained."

The CIA has worked at Guantanamo Bay since the early days of the prison camps, which opened in January 2002 when the first men captured in the Afghan war were transferred to a collection of chain-link cages called Camp X-Ray. The CIA has kept an office at the Navy base and takes part in interrogation sessions of Defense Department detainees alongside FBI agents, military intelligence officers and others in what are called Tiger Teams.

Many of the interrogations have been conducted inside trailers set up within the perimeter of Camp Delta, a more permanent compound of steel cages that took the place of Camp X-Ray by the end of 2003.

The facility used by the CIA is in Camp Echo, which also houses high-value military detainees. The camp consists of more than a dozen single-story concrete-block huts built away from the main prison complex. Each hut is divided in half. Inside is a steel cage, a restroom, and a table for interviews and interrogations, according to sources familiar with the facility.

The CIA's facility has been "off-limits to nearly everyone on the base," said one military official familiar with operations at Guantanamo Bay.

One of the huts at Camp Echo has been occupied by a detainee named Mohamedou Oulad Slahi, according to one source familiar with the new compound. Slahi, a Mauritanian

businessman, acted as the liaison between a group of Islamic radicals living in Hamburg and al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, according to the Sept. 11 commission.

According to statements given by the key plotter, Binalshibh, Slahi persuaded the men to go to Afghanistan, rather than Chechnya, to fight.

He arranged their travel and for them to meet al Qaeda operatives in Pakistan, who in turn arranged a meeting between Binalshibh and bin Laden.

Slahi was arrested by secret police in Mauritania during the night on Sept. 27, 2001, members of his family told local media at the time. By December, he was in U.S. custody.