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US Plays Down Guantanamo Strike

BBC News
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Hunger-striking detainees at the US detention centre at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba are fasting because they are attempting to get media attention, a senior US army official has said. Some detainees have been on hunger strike for nearly two months, apparently in protest over conditions and their alleged mistreatment at the camp.

Lt Col Jeremy Martin told BBC World Service's Outlook programme that the technique of "voluntary fasting" is "consistent with al-Qaeda training" and "reflects detainees attempts to elicit media attention".

But a relative of one of the hunger strikers said he was doing it for a reason that they cannot reveal due to legal restrictions imposed by the US.

'Valuable information'

Details of the hunger strike, the second this year, emerged in statements which were declassified by the US authorities earlier this month, and given to a British human rights lawyer who represents some of the detainees.

Lt Col Martin said 29 detainees were involved in the hunger strike, all of whom were being "closely monitored" by the guards and medical personnel.

"There are currently 20 detainees in the hospital. The detainees are clinically stable and will continue to receive nutrition and fluids as needed," he said.

He insisted that detainees were well treated. They are given culturally appropriate food and drink and are allowed to practice their religion, he said. They are given clothing, shelter and health care and are allowed to send and receive mail.

He said that holding the detainees provided "valuable information in the war on terror".

"Many of these enemy combatants are highly trained, dangerous members of al-Qaeda, its related terrorist networks, and the former Taleban regime," he said.

"This unprecedented body of information has expanded our understanding of al-Qaeda and other terrorist organisations and continues to prove valuable.

"Our intelligence and law enforcement communities continue to develop leads, comprehensive assessments, and intelligence products based on information detainees provide."

The first hunger strike, in June, ended after the authorities made promises including better access to books and bottled drinking water.

Torture allegations

But some of the detainees have since claimed they were tricked into eating again.

The sister of one of the hunger strikers told Outlook she was "very concerned" for his health.

Aamani DeGhayes, whose brother Omar was captured in Pakistan, said he had been in Guantanamo for almost four years and she was sure his health "is not all that great, because the kind of treatment they've been giving them - they've not been allowed water for a very long time". Aamani said the precise reason for her brother's hunger strike cannot be revealed.

"There's a classification system for censorship, and even his lawyer is not allowed to speak about these things unless it's been declassified," she said.

She said a friend typed in her name into the internet search engine Google, and showed her her brother's name on a site detailing America's Most Wanted list.

The site also said he was wanted in connection with a terrorist training video filmed in Chechnya. Aamani maintains her brother has never been to Chechnya.

She said she had still not been told directly what her brother is accused of, although her mother receives heavily censored notes from him.

Aamani said Omar's lawyer had told them "horrific" details of his alleged torture.

"There's a lot of torture that he's gone through," she said.

"The main one that was very shocking was the fact that he's been blinded in his eye.

"They sprayed his eyes with pepper mace, and then they poked him in the eye. Apparently they were being egged on by the others, according to his account."