

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

Illegal Trip Protests Guantanamo Prison

Baltimore activists will join others in march through Cuba to U.S. base

Matthew Hay Brown

Baltimore Sun

December 6, 2005

More than two dozen activists from Baltimore and elsewhere have arrived in Cuba to protest the U.S. detention-and-interrogation operation at Guantanamo Bay.

The activists, most of them Christian, have broken U.S. law by traveling to the communist nation. They were planning to set out this morning for the Navy base in southeastern Cuba where the United States is holding about 500 foreign terror suspects without prisoner-of-war status or criminal charges.

They expect the 50-mile march from the city of Santiago to take four or five days. If they reach the installation - which is guarded by U.S. and Cuban checkpoints and surrounded by a minefield - they will demand to see the detainees.

"There is in our faith the tradition of the corporal works of mercy," the Rev. Steve Kelly, a Jesuit priest, said before leaving for Cuba. "It's only Christian of us to comfort those who are imprisoned."

The activists, many of whom have been imprisoned themselves for protesting at U.S. military and defense contractor sites, have been meeting at Jonah House, the Catholic Worker community in West Baltimore that was co-founded in 1973 by war resisters Philip F. Berrigan and Liz McAlister. Berrigan gained national prominence in 1968 as a leader of the Catonsville Nine Vietnam War draft protest.

Their daughter Frida Berrigan is an organizer of the Cuba trip. The activists include veterans of inner-city poverty work and pacifist actions in Iraq and Israel, and they oppose U.S. military policy generally. They have seized on claims of prisoner abuse at Guantanamo Bay, where a U.S. joint task force has been holding and interrogating foreigners captured in Afghanistan and the region after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

Interrogators there have used cold, heat, loud music and sleep deprivation on their subjects, according to a military investigation this year. In one case, a female interrogator smeared what she described as menstrual blood - it was fake - on a prisoner. In another, a Navy officer threatened to harm the family of a detainee, in violation of U.S. military law.

The investigation followed allegations by FBI agents who said they had seen interrogators insert lit cigarettes into prisoners' ears and chain prisoners to the floor in the fetal position for extended periods. Detainees who have been released have spoken of being forced to look at pornographic images, menaced with dogs and beaten.

"I think it's important for the world to know that there's not a consensus in this country that torture is OK," said Susan Crane, a resident of Jonah House.

Bush administration and Pentagon officials have said repeatedly that the United States does not condone the torture of prisoners.

"There's an enemy that lurks and plots and plans and wants to hurt America again," President Bush said last month. "So you bet we will aggressively pursue them, but we will do so under the law. ... We do not torture."

Key members of Congress are pushing for a formal ban on torture. Vice President Dick Cheney has lobbied to exempt the CIA from such a prohibition.

At Guantanamo Bay, the activists plan to confront one of the U.S. military's most sensitive installations during a time of war. Even as opposition to U.S. policy in Iraq grows, there has been little call to close what's known as Joint Task Force Guantanamo.

Nor is the activists' opposition to military action universal among Christians. Many Christians support U.S. military policy in Iraq and elsewhere as a righteous response to the problem of evil.

"I would not reject out of hand the present administration's attempts to liberate a particular people," said J. Daryl Charles, the author of *Between Pacifism and Jihad: Just War and Christian Tradition*.

"We use force morally," said Charles, a professor of religion and ethics at Union University in Jackson, Tenn. "We apply it in order to prevent the greater evil."

Crane called Christian support for war "very sad."

"The early Christians knew you couldn't be Christian and serve in the military," she said. "You had to make a choice. Jesus was talking about loving your enemies."

Crane said the group has informed Cuban officials of its plans but has neither sought nor received Cuban permission or support.

If the activists reach the base, Crane said, they will demand to see the detainees. If unable to proceed, they will attempt to hold a prayer vigil.

"I've been in prison when people outside were holding a vigil," said Crane, who has been arrested for demonstrating at U.S. military bases. "I could feel the encouragement - not just me, but the other women, that people were praying for me. It brings hope."

Jonah House resident Gary Ashbeck traveled through Iraq before the U.S.-led invasion in 2003. He spoke of the need for accountability at Guantanamo Bay.

"This idea of just holding people, taking them prisoners, and just the sketchiness of how they're getting these prisoners ... everything about it just really needs oversight," he said. "What [U.S. officials have] done is they've created a location that completely has no oversight."

The Pentagon has allowed teams from the International Committee of the Red Cross to visit the prisoners, but the committee does not report its findings publicly.

Crane said the U.S. war on terror would not bring security. She said the only way the country can protect itself is by changing its attitudes and actions toward the rest of the world.

"Jesus brought a new commandment: to love one another," she said. "To me, nonviolence is the only thing that's going to work."