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## Guantanamo Hunger Strike More than Doubles; 84 Inmates Involved

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The number of detainees on a hunger strike at the U.S. naval base at Cuba's Guantanamo Bay has more than doubled in the past week, the U.S. military said.

Forty-six detainees joined existing hunger strikers on Dec. 25, to bring the total number of prisoners refusing food to 84, the military said yesterday on the Southern Command's Web site. That's about a sixth of the internment center's inmates.

The military said the detainees are trying to put pressure on the U.S. to release them. Detainees' lawyers have said the hunger strikers are protesting their continued detention without trial and conditions at the base.

Some former detainees have said they were abused at the prison. Human rights groups have criticized interrogation procedures there, and the U.S. Supreme Court is due to hear arguments on whether detainees can be tried by military tribunals.

"The number of detainees engaged in the current fast, which began on August 8, 2005, routinely fluctuates," the military said in the statement. "Since then, increases in the number of fasters have coincided with the anniversary of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and the scheduled arrival of defense attorneys representing certain detainees."

The statement did not explain why the new batch of detainees chose Dec. 25 to join the protest, nor did it give information on the physical condition of those refusing food since August.

Taliban

The U.S. holds 505 detainees at Guantanamo, some of them captured after the U.S. ousted Afghanistan's Taliban regime following the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. Many have been held for more than three years without charge. While detainees' lawyers have sought their trial or release, the U.S. says they are "enemy combatants" and that their detention is necessary as part of the campaign against terrorism.

Detainees are considered to be on a hunger strike after they miss nine consecutive meals, according to the U.S. military. Medical staff then monitor the weight loss and physical condition of the strikers.

"This technique (hunger striking) is consistent with al-Qaeda training and reflects detainee attempts to elicit media attention and bring pressure on the United States Government to release them," the U.S. military said. "Enemy combatants on voluntary fast are closely monitored by medical professionals, receive excellent medical care, and when required, the appropriate amount of daily nutrition and hydration through enteral feeding," or tubes inserted through the nose and into the stomach.

Military Tribunals

The Supreme Court on Nov. 7 said it will hear arguments on whether President George W. Bush's administration is permitted to use military tribunals to try terrorism suspects held at Guantanamo. A date for the hearing hasn't been set.

Military tribunals don't offer all the rights afforded to other U.S. criminal defendants. They permit exclusion of the accused from parts of the proceeding, allow witness statements in place of sworn testimony, and direct appeals to either the defense secretary or president, according to lawyers for Yemeni national Salim Ahmed Hamdan, who brought the case to the high court.

The U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit in July ruled 3-0 that Congress authorized the president to set up military tribunals when lawmakers approved the use of force to fight terrorism following the Sept. 11 attacks.

The court also said the Geneva Convention on the treatment of prisoners of war isn't enforceable in federal court and doesn't apply to al-Qaeda members.