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Ferguson's Guantanamo Trip Sheds Light on Treatment of Detainees

Congressman says Muslim detainees are being treated fairly.

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Congressman Mike Ferguson said he returned from a tour of the U.S. detention center in Guantanamo Bay last month confident that the terrorist suspects there are being treated humanely.

"These are dangerous guys, they have information that could be useful to us in the war on terror, and they're being treated very well," Ferguson said.

The Republican congressman from New Providence met with Courier News editors last week to discuss his trip to Guantanamo Bay and the war in Iraq. On July 30, Ferguson and five other congressmen visited the U.S. detention center at its base in Cuba, where the military says about 500 prisoners are being held.

Ferguson acknowledged that on his way to the base, he wondered if he would get an accurate picture of what the place was like or if the congressmen would see a rose-colored version of the base, where cases of alleged prisoner abuse have fueled cries to have the place closed.

He said he asked Brig. Gen. Jay Hood, commander of Joint Task Force Guantanamo, about allegations of prisoner abuse and troop mishandling of the Quran. Ferguson said Hood showed him the spot where a soldier allegedly urinated on the Quran.

The incident, Hood told Ferguson, occurred when a soldier was urinating outside and some urine got into an air intake pipe which led to a prisoner's cell, where it landed on the Quran. Hood told Ferguson the soldier was removed from the base for urinating outside in violation of regulations, and the prisoner's cell was cleaned and everything in it was replaced.

Ferguson said that Hood "was very confident and very convincing in telling what he stands for, what he does not stand for."

Instead of seeing soldiers use the prisoners' religious beliefs as a tool to harass them, Ferguson said, he saw arrows spray-painted on the floor of each cell, pointing toward Mecca to tell them which way to face when they pray. He heard loudspeaker announcements telling prisoners when to pray five times a day. He saw the prayer mats each prisoner received.

"It's as though you're in a Muslim city," Ferguson said.

Ferguson said he wanted to try a typical detainee's meal, but the cook refused his request because he was preparing a meal that day designed specifically for the religious requirements of the Muslim prisoners. So the congressmen ate turkey sandwiches.

While there, the delegation also watched two very different interrogations of two prisoners over closed-circuit television.

In the first, the prisoner sat with his hands and feet shackled, refusing to answer any questions the interrogator threw at him, and then was taken back to his cell after an hour, Ferguson said.

The second interrogation, Ferguson said, looked like just a group of people who were just sitting around and talking. The prisoner, one who had been deemed cooperative and not dangerous, was sitting on a couch, unshackled, talking and laughing with the interrogators. Their purpose was to find out if he knew anything useful about a suspect in one of the July bombings in the London Underground.

Human rights organizations such as Amnesty International have called for the United States to close the prison and either charge all detainees under U.S. law or set them free. Most detainees were arrested during the U.S. war in Afghanistan and have been at Guantanamo Bay for more than three years. But Ferguson said he believes the United States is doing what it can to release prisoners who are not dangerous or don't have any useful intelligence to offer.

"They very much want to release guys that don't need to be there," Ferguson said.

He underscored the need to have such a base in a location like Guantanamo Bay.

"Where would you suggest we put these folks? New Jersey? Nebraska?" Ferguson said. "They're safe. They're not going anywhere... You have Cuba on one side, you have the ocean on the other."

Just as he believes the detainees need to stay in Guantanamo for more time, Ferguson said U.S. troops need to stay in Iraq a little longer, too. He said American troops need to stay there until Iraq has a stable government, and its people can defend themselves.

"We shouldn't have one American service member there longer than necessary," he said. "Most people agree that they should come home as quickly as possible as soon as the job is done. ... It's very difficult to make the case that the job is done."