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How Guantanamo's 505 Inmates Live With Their Captors

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WASHINGTON: Camp Delta, which grew out of the notorious Camp X-Ray that housed the first detainees to arrive in this picturesque 45-square mile naval base leased from Cuba a hundred years ago, is actually made up of five camps that currently contain 505 inmates, from diehard, unrepentant jihadis to those who are either quite harmless or who have had a change of heart and ideological direction.

A group of six journalists, including this correspondent, flown from Washington last week by the State Department with the cooperation of the Department of Defence, did the rounds of what was America's first overseas military base. About 400 miles off the coast of Miami, Florida, Guantanamo – Gitmo for short – includes two and a half miles of Guantanamo Bay which empties into the Caribbean Sea. A treaty confirmed the lease in 1934, granting Cuba and her trading partners free access through the Bay in exchange for a payment of \$2,000 in gold per year.

Since 1961, when diplomatic relations with the US were severed, Cuba has refused to accept the annual payment, though it is still sent by cheques which remain uncashed. Before the Bay of Pigs crisis, nearly 3,000 Cubans worked on the base. They have since either returned, retired or died. However, three of them still work on the base, the youngest being 76 years old. One of the three to this day does not speak English. The Cubans have been replaced by workers from the Philippines and Jamaica. The total population of the base is 8,000.

Last Wednesday, this correspondent visited all five camps that go under the collective name of Camp Delta. Four of the camps are located in a cluster inside the same fence, while the fifth one called Camp Five, lies some distance away. Camp One has a capacity of 400 and contains 31 percent of the detainees; followed by Camp Two (nine percent), Camp Three (10 percent), Camp Four (34 percent) and Camp Five (16 percent). The most "cooperative" of the detainees are kept in Camp Four and are allowed a kind of community living. They and the inmates of Camp Five wear white, while those in the other three camps wear orange, the colour that has come to be universally associated with Guantanamo.

We were told that every allegation about the mistreatment of the detainees is investigated and in the last four years 400 separate investigations had been held worldwide by the United States government, and 250 people proceeded against, including general officers. At Guantanamo, only five investigations have been held since the establishment of the detention facility in January 2002. We were told that no day passes when some detainee does not throw things at guards or call them names but the guards are under strict instructions not to react but to report the incident. Action is taken against the detainee which consists of a withdrawal of some facility or a reprimand or warning. We were shown the small 20-bed hospital that can be expanded, if need be, to take care of 30 indoor patients. It has performed 128 surgeries to date, including one for a cardiac problem and one to remove a malignant tumour. There have been no inmate deaths. The hospital also has facilities for psychiatric care.

Guantanamo was hot when we arrived but there is always a sea breeze. Humidity, however, remains high. After a long period of drought that turned all vegetation brown, there has been plenty of rain in the last couple of years, which has made the enclave prove true to its given name of 'Pearl of the Antilles'. The place abounds in iguanas who seem unafraid of both men and traffic. They are a protected species and there is a fine of \$8,000 if you kill one, deliberately or through negligence. Other non-human residents of Gitmo are banana rats, vultures, red crabs,

tarantulas, snakes, scorpions and mosquitoes. The bay is rich in fish and the anglers among its residents will seldom have a day without a catch to take home or brag about. The weather remains hot and humid throughout the year though the winter months between November and February are said to be pleasant though warm.

Our journalists' group, which contained two other Pakistanis, one Malaysian, one Indonesian and one Bangladeshi, was taken to Camp One first and shown a typical cell which was just eight feet by 6.8 feet. It had a built-in bed with a mattress and a few basic items of daily use, including clothing, sheets and towels and a prayer mat. The cell also contained a squat-down toilet and a tiny metallic basin where the inmate could wash his face or hands with a spurt of water. All meals were delivered through a small window that could only be opened from the outside by one of the guards. The most disturbing thing about the cell was its total lack of privacy, the walls being made of meshed wire. The cells lay at either side of a long corridor which was patrolled by guards. We were not allowed to talk to any detainees as it was said to be a violation of the Geneva Conventions. We were also shown quite confined "recreational" areas where the inmates, when they were let out – from 30 minutes a day to an hour – could play with a soccer ball to get some exercise.

Since it is the month of Ramazan, most of the inmates - about 85 percent – were said to be fasting. The call to prayer is sounded five times a day by playing a CD recorded in Mecca. Congregational prayers are not permitted except in Camp Four. However, we were told that in the other camps, when the azan is sounded, the inmates stand in their individual cells and the prayers are led by an imam who has been chosen by popular consent. Each inmate is issued with a copy of the Quran and also a couple of games like chess and checkers. In Camp Five, which is a centrally airconditioned facility, there are individual cells for each inmate. These are larger and also give privacy to the resident. The occupants of this section are maximum security detainees, but since they have been found "compliant", they have been rewarded by being moved to this much nicer facility. Camps Four and Five are also made to serve as an "incentive" to the residents of the other three camps who live in a much harsher environment. The incentive is that if they behave and cooperate, they too could be moved up to the more congenial Camps Four or Five.

Outside each camp, there is a large sign that says under the name of the camp "Honour bound to defend freedom". Ironically, the main watchtower in one of the camps is called 'Liberty Tower'. The average age of the detainees is 34 and the oldest detainee is 72 years of age, while the youngest is 20. When he was brought in, he was only 17. Almost all of the inmates wear beards and "Islamic" skullcaps.

The most diehard and "non-compliant" of the inmates are housed in Camps Two and Three, especially in Camp Two. At the hospital that we visited, the doctor in charge told us that 50 percent of the Guantanamo detainees had never been seen by a physician before they were brought over. Even more of them had never been examined by a dentist. He said everyone who came to the hospital received the same level of care that would be given to a US soldier. He said there had been 34 suicide attempts since 2004, none of them successful. Currently, he added, 24 of the inmates were on hunger strike, some in "tribute" to the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks. If an inmate was feared to be endangering his life or health, he was fed intravenously or by tubes inserted through his nose to his stomach. There were some inmates who refused to take the medication given to them, but they were not forced to take the medication. There are five doctors and 12 nurses, male and female, at the hospital. We were given the somewhat surprising news that a couple of the inmates of the Camps were Christians. The nationality of the inmates was not revealed, but according to a Pakistan embassy official in Washington, there is only one Pakistani among them now. Another source places the number at three. Most of the inmates are Saudi or Afghan. There are also Yemenis and Central Asians.

The Guantanamo tour of our group ended on October 15 when we flew to Jackson, Florida, en route to Norfolk, Virginia, and from there by bus to Washington, getting home in the small hours of Sunday.