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Guantanamo Claims Spur Call for Independent Probe

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The Bush administration on Thursday faced renewed calls for an independent inspection of its Guantanamo Bay detention facility following allegations that the US military was force feeding 20 detainees on hunger strike.

Clive Stafford-Smith, a London-based lawyer acting on behalf of some of the detainees, said the prisoners were being fed through tubes in their noses.

"To have my clients being restrained against their will, with a tube forced down their noses, after all they have been through, just makes me sick," Mr. Stafford-Smith said in London.

The allegations came a day after the US Senate voted overwhelmingly to approve a measure that will prevent the Pentagon from using on detainees any interrogation tactics not included in the army field manual. The 90-9 vote came in defiance of President George W. Bush, who has said it would hamper the US's ability to prosecute its "war on terror".

The White House has threatened to veto the defense appropriations bill if it includes the amendment, but the strength of support in the Senate will make it difficult for the House to strip out the measure.

Mr. Stafford-Smith and other lawyers representing the detainees accused the US government of renegeing on its policy to improve the conditions of those held in Guantanamo in apparent contravention of the Geneva Convention.

Amnesty International called for an independent body to be given full access to the facilities to investigate and report on the allegations.

In a letter sent on Thursday to Tony Blair, British prime minister, Amnesty expressed its "deep concern" that as many as 210 of the 510 detainees at Guantanamo were reported to be on hunger strike, with several "seriously ill and in some cases too weak to stand".

Amnesty said it "fully supported" the goals of the hunger strikers which include the right to a fair trial, contact with families, access to sunlight, and the central demand for an independent body to observe and report openly on their conditions.

The letter urged Mr. Blair to make "immediate representations to the US government" on behalf of previous UK residents being held at Guantanamo and to urge Washington to meet the hunger strikers' demands.

However, the Foreign Office said on Thursday night: "The British government is not in a position to provide consular or diplomatic assistance for non-British nationals in Guantanamo Bay."

Trevor Turner, a leading psychiatrist and clinical director at London's St Bartholomew's Hospital, said that forced feeding was delaying the death of the hunger strikers indefinitely. He added: "The practice as applied in Guantanamo is clearly unethical in medical terms."

