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Guantanamo Detainees Parole Hearings Begin

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SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico -- The U.S. military has started annual parole hearings for detainees held indefinitely at a prison camp at the U.S. Navy base in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, officials said Thursday.

The Administrative Review Board has heard the cases of three detainees since the proceedings began Tuesday, but none of them chose to attend, said Navy Capt. Beci Brenton, a Pentagon spokeswoman.

The U.S. government is holding 550 detainees from more than 40 countries at Guantanamo. They are accused of links to the al-Qaida terror network or the ousted Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

The new hearings, overseen by three military officers, will determine whether individual detainees remain a threat to the United States or still have intelligence value, Brenton said.

"I would anticipate people being released out of this process," she said in a telephone interview. Brenton declined to speculate on how many might be released.

There are three possible rulings: release, transfer to a home government or continued detention, the military said. The first decisions from the hearings should be made within the next six to eight weeks.

It was not clear when the decisions would be announced to the public, Brenton said. The hearings will slow during the holiday season but pick up again after Jan. 1, she said.

The review board hearings are slightly different from the ongoing Combatant Status Review Tribunals, which determine whether individual detainees should be classified as "enemy combatants." Those hearings are scheduled to finish by the end of next month. The government defines enemy combatants as anyone who supported the Taliban or al-Qaida. Human rights groups complain the classification is vague and does not allow the same legal protections granted prisoners of war under the Geneva Conventions.

The review tribunals are nearly done with only about 49 detainees to go. The military has announced 207 decisions in the tribunals, ordering all but one detainee to remain in custody.

A 45-year-old prisoner gave a written and oral statement at his review tribunal Thursday, said Lt. Gary Ross, a spokesman for the tribunals. Although the man was accused of links to al-Qaida, it was unclear what he said at his hearing. The military has not released transcripts of statements made at the tribunals.

Separately, the military last week began distributing forms to detainees explaining how they can challenge their indefinite imprisonment at the remote naval base in eastern Cuba, Pentagon spokesman Maj. Michael Shavers said.

The decision to give out the forms came six months after a U.S. Supreme Court ruling allowed the detainees to challenge their incarcerations in U.S. courts.

The form tells the detainees that they are classified as "enemy combatants" and that the "United States may continue to detain you," according to a copy provided on a Pentagon Web site. It also informs them that they may ask a civilian judge to examine their case through a petition called a writ of habeas corpus.

The document then provides the address of the U.S. District Court in Washington, D.C. and says they can ask a friend, relative or lawyer to file such a petition with the court.

Since a Supreme Court ruling in June cleared the way for detainees to use U.S. courts, civilian attorneys have poured into Guantanamo to meet with clients.

Human rights groups were also quick to criticize the new notification, saying it was late in coming and did not set out clear guidelines on how to file a petition.

"The notice does little to provide the detainees with any meaningful information about their rights, or how to get into court," said Rachel Meeropol, a lawyer at the New York-based Center for Constitutional Rights.

The military says that is not the case, arguing that about 60 detainees have American lawyers who have filed petitions on their behalf even before the notification was sent.