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Guantanamo Tribunal Begins Hearing 6 Cases

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GUANTANAMO BAY NAVAL BASE, Cuba - A U.S. military review tribunal began hearing the cases Friday of six prisoners held as enemy combatants to determine whether they should be freed or continue to be detained under the same status.

The tribunal reviewed five cases Thursday including that of a Saudi detainee accused of training at a terrorist camp to fight in Chechnya and Kashmir who rejected most of the allegations against him.

The so-called Combat Status Review Tribunals are meant to determine whether some 550 men at Guantanamo should be freed or are held properly as enemy combatants, a distinction that affords fewer legal protections than prisoners of war.

Only four of the suspects have been formally charged and are awaiting trials before separate military commissions, scheduled to begin in December.

Details of Friday's hearings were not immediately available.

The 23-year-old Saudi, whom journalists are prohibited from naming, was the 140th Guantanamo prisoner to have his case reviewed by a three-member panel. The United States accuses him of being recruited in Saudi Arabia to fight in Chechnya and Kashmir and of training at the al-Farouk terrorist training camp in Afghanistan.

The military says he joined Afghanistan's Taliban regime after a fatwa, or religious edict, from Sheik Ha al-Uqla at the Imam Muhammad Bin Saud College in Burayda, Saudi Arabia.

One of his aliases also was allegedly found on a computer list of al-Qaida members who reportedly had been captured. The military said it was found on the hard drive of a senior al-Qaida member.

"The words that you said are not true," said the Saudi. "I did not go to Chechnya or Kashmir. I never met that sheik who was mentioned and I never fought with the Taliban or al-Qaida."

Although the Saudi detainee denied training to fight in Chechnya and Kashmir, he said he received physical and handgun training at a camp in Afghanistan but did not know its name. None of the panel members asked what conflict he was planning on fighting in.

The Saudi said information provided by an interrogator about the alleged fatwa was incorrect.

He was one of three prisoners who appeared at hearings Thursday, while two others declined to attend, officials said.

Fifty-six prisoners have refused to attend the reviews so far.

Although the hearings are open to the media, most go uncovered because multiple hearings are held most days and journalists are not allowed to stay on the base for extended periods of time.

Unclassified portions of allegations are provided to media who do not attend hearings, but a prisoner's testimony - which often contradicts government allegations - is not provided.

One criticism of the tribunals is that prisoners only know a fraction of the information the government has and cannot deny accusations. Prisoners are not allowed attorneys during the administrative hearings.

"The tribunals take a fresh look at all the information available about each individual to make a determination of their enemy combatant status," said Lt. Cmdr. Daryl Borgquist, a spokesman. "The detainee is presented with an unclassified list of information in the government's possession."

Only one Pakistani prisoner has been freed in the review tribunals, which are expected to hear all cases by year's end.

The first review tribunal took place July 30, about a month after the U.S. Supreme Court ruled prisoners have the right to challenge their detentions in federal court. There are now about 60 federal cases pending.