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Force-Feeding Breaks Protest at Guantánamo

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The Pentagon faced a groundswell of protest about its treatment of detainees at Guantánamo yesterday after it emerged that a hunger strike had been broken by force-feeding inmates and putting them in restraints.

Five months after inmates at Guantánamo began the strike to protest against their indefinite detention at the US naval base only four remain on hunger strike. Three of those are being force-fed with tubes through the nose, a Pentagon spokesman said.

He denied charges that the Pentagon was trying to break the hunger strike by punishing the protesters. "They are not trying to reduce the hunger strike, but they are going to feed people to protect life," he said. The feeding was administered by medical professionals in "a humane and compassionate manner" using the same process as in civilian prisons.

The spokesman said the men were stable, and their condition was being monitored by doctors - a claim disputed by lawyers who have recently visited Guantánamo. The lawyers described the four hunger strikers as being extremely ill, and said that one was close to death.

The lawyers also accused the military of trying to break the protest through painful force-feeding, or by subjecting the hunger strikers to isolation and restraints, to avoid the risk of detainees committing suicide by starvation.

"The military at Guantánamo has reacted extremely violently against the detainees who have been involved in the hunger strike protest. They have come down very harshly," said Gitanjali Gutierrez, a lawyer for the Centre for Constitutional Rights, which represents more than 100 inmates. Ms Gutierrez visited the base last month.

In court documents inmates have accused their jailers of being overly rough in the insertion and removal of feeding tubes - a charge the Pentagon denies. In addition, the New York Times reported yesterday that guards had strapped detainees into restraint chairs for hours at a time to prevent them from vomiting after being force-fed. Other hunger strikers have been placed in isolation for long periods, or deprived of blankets or books.

The newspaper said the tougher measures were imposed in recent weeks amid fears at the Pentagon that some of the prisoners were determined to kill themselves. Since the resort to restraints and forcefeeding there has been a steep drop in the number of hunger strikers, from 84 in December to four.

"They are abusing them psychologically, they are abusing them physically to the point where it becomes too painful to continue in the strike. They harass them until they begin to eat again," it claimed.

Amnesty International called for independent medical experts to be allowed to visit the hunger strikers.

"These fresh reports concerning the cruel treatment of hunger strikers are disturbing," Amnesty's UK director, Kate Allen, said.

There have been periodic hunger strikes at Guantánamo since the Bush administration established the prison in January 2002 to hold suspects in the war on terror beyond the oversight of the US courts. However, since last year the hunger strikes have intensified, with the inmates reportedly in despair that they will ever be released.

At the height of the protest last September more than 130 prisoners were on hunger strike, according to the Pentagon. However, detainees' lawyers fear the true numbers are even higher because the US military will only consider a detainee is on hunger strike if he misses nine consecutive meals.

The Pentagon spokesman would not be drawn yesterday on why so many detainees had abandoned their protest. However, one official said: "The hunger strike issue is more of a publicity ploy than anything else. Al-Qaida training manuals tell them what type of resistance to offer when detained."

He added: "Maybe they started eating again since it didn't work."