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Gitmo is Focus of Tough PR Fight

Controversy has dogged prison; Public perception frustrates military

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U.S. NAVAL STATION, GUANTANAMO BAY, Cuba — Driving to the hoop, the jihadist missed the layup.

The basketball bounced high across the cement half-court in the prison yard. A bearded comrade grabbed it, launching a weak jumper that clanged off the rim.

Their skills may improve when the Converse high-tops arrive — the military ordered them for the alleged terrorists here a while ago.

So passed a recent afternoon at Joint Task Force Guantanamo, home to about 500 men the Bush administration considers among the most dangerous in the world. The camp has always been controversial, from allegations of mistreatment, to a policy that keeps prisoners indefinitely without charges, to efforts to cut detainee access to the courts.

Another inmate jogged around the yard, while others huddled in small groups, sipping Gatorade. Some spoke quietly with guards through the fence.

Here in Camp 4 are the detainees most compliant with the rules; about one-third of the population, say military authorities.

“You’d probably be surprised to know we have several detainees who have their own barbecue grill,” said Army Maj. Gen. Jay Hood, commanding general of JTF GTMO, as the operation is known in military lingo.

“A Potemkin village,” retorted David Remes, an attorney for 17 Yemeni detainees. He said Camp 4 showed visitors a Club Med-like existence that was nothing like the daily lives of most detainees.

He called his clients’ treatment “degrading, humiliating,” and said detainees were tortured.

Hood flatly denied that. People not familiar with accepted interrogation techniques in the Army field manual may mistake intimidation for abuse, he said.

In a conversation that turned to torture and the argument that it was often unproductive, Hood leaned forward, raised his eyebrows, and let out an exaggerated “Duhhhh!”

Whatever the facts of GTMO, the U.S. military is in a tough public relations battle.

The camp has inspired a scorching off-Broadway play called "Guantanamo." Human-rights groups call it part of an international gulag, conjuring Soviet-era images. Sen. Joe Biden, a Delaware Democrat, advocates closing the operation.

"I have some real concerns about how people have been treated there," said Eugene Fidell, a Washington lawyer who specializes in military law. He represented an Army officer who was accused of espionage at GTMO.

"People are not being housed in a normal POW environment. When you have people not charged with an offense, and almost none of them are charged, you don't hold them in circumstances like this."

Frustration with the public perception of their mission is palpable among personnel here, from Hood down to guards.

"As you can see, it's much like we would be treated if we were taken prisoner," said Capt. John Adams, his voice rich with irony.

Then the Army officer (who saw combat in Afghanistan) added: "Are you kidding me? My head would be chopped off on Al-Jazeera (television)."

Hood said that about the only things missing from Guantanamo that a POW camp would have are a detainee self-government, a commissary, and a prison band.

Of course, unlike a POW camp, there is no guarantee detainees will ever leave (although about 350 have been released).

'Inside the wire'

Perched on a low bluff overlooking the Caribbean Sea, Camp Delta, the main part of the facility, is a series of one-story buildings surrounded by razor-wire and chain-link fence. A cooling sea breeze occasionally breaks the sun-drenched heat.

Camp Delta holds camps 1, 2, 3 and 4, housing about 400 of the 500 or so detainees.

Camps 1, 2 and 3 feature basic metal cell blocks. The 8-foot by 10-foot cells each have a bed, a mattress, a toilet and a sink.

Metal mesh — some covered with clear plastic — separates the prisoner from the guard in the middle aisles. In each cell door is a "bean hole" for delivering food trays and applying handcuffs before moving a detainee

outside.

Sometimes, detainees make their own deliveries through the mesh and the bean holes. The guards call them “cocktails.” The ingredients can be urine, feces and semen.

The scrutiny of Guantanamo means you just shrug it off.

“They come hard with the racial slurs,” said Mitchell Young, a Navy guard. “You just walk away from the situation, try to decompress. Take a smoke break.”

The compliant graduate to Camp 4, where sizable rooms hold several bunks. More outdoor time and, soon, air conditioning.

Outside Delta stands Camp 5, with Camp 6 under construction next to it. Concrete prefab buildings, they look like any modern-day state prison. Eventually, Camps 1, 2 and 3 will be closed.

There are good days, too. Human connection made between the guard and the guarded.

Mostly, it is chats about the weather, sports, the Qur’an and English words that detainees see in books they are given.

“Man, it’s hard to teach someone from an Arab country what a muggle is,” said Chris Cunningham, a Navy guard, referring to the Harry Potter books. “Man, muggle’s hard. Quidditch, too.”

Point, counterpoint

Controversy has dogged the base since the first men were brought here in January 2002 after being captured on the Afghan battlefield and in nearby areas.

There were the Camp X-Ray photos, featuring manacled men in orange jumpsuits.

A report that a Qur’an was thrown down a toilet — retracted, but not before instigating deadly riots overseas. Confirmation by military authorities of some improper incidents. All predated Hood’s tenure.

“There’s clearly been some misbehavior down there,” said John Pike, director of GlobalSecurity.org, a defense policy think tank. “They themselves have acknowledged it. Given the propensity of large institutions to lie to protect themselves, I suspect it’s worse than has been let on.”

Since the Supreme Court last year granted detainees access to the courts, more accusations have tumbled forth in thousands of pages of court filings.

Detainees' attorneys have a long list, including medical care.

"The men are afraid to go to the medical clinic," said Remes. "They say the medical staff is a half step above veterinarians.

"They can't find veins, they pull the wrong teeth. I have clients with fractures that have gone untreated."

"Absolute lies, directly from detainee to counsel," Hood replied, insisting he and his troops get the same care.

He points to the Manchester Document, an al-Qaida training manual recovered in England. It instructs claiming mistreatment whenever possible as captives.

"Counsel goes to meet with his client," Hood said. "The detainee tells him whatever he wants. Most of the counsel have not studied these guys as closely as they should, without question."

Critics count 36 suicide attempts by detainees. Hood counters that in his 20 months here, there have been four.

The latest furor over GTMO is Sen. Lindsey Graham's effort to nullify a Supreme Court decision allowing detainees to challenge their detention in federal courts.

His amendment is designed to counter the hundreds of habeas corpus claims filed by Guantanamo prisoners.

It would, however, allow those found guilty of being "enemy combatants" by military tribunals to appeal to a federal appeals court in Washington.

"There has never been a time in our military history where an enemy combatant or prisoner of war has been allowed access to federal court to bring lawsuits against the people they are fighting," said Graham, a South Carolina Republican.

Remes decries "erecting a theoretical structure where the courts get cut out ..."

"It may start off with the brown guys with long beards and turbans, but the logic winds up with freckle-faced Americans whom the government decides to label terrorists or terrorist supporters."

Without offering details, Hood said that even after being held more than three years, detainees still provide useful intelligence. Sen. Pat Roberts, a Kansas Republican who is chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, which has oversight of GTMO, agreed.

“These folks, because of their family and tribal backgrounds, they may not know who did a bombing, but they know what the connections are, know their families, know where to go for information,” Roberts said. “It’s a network type of thing. Kind of like the Mafia.”

The general hopes the secrecy will someday lift so the public will know more about the kind of detainees he is in charge of.

“I intend to press for more specific releases of information about key people, so it is well-known. It’s really important they not be on the streets of major cities in the world.

“I’ve been in the Army over 30 years. If I didn’t have tangible evidence that what we’re doing is protecting Americans and helping the U.S. effort in the global war on terror, I would certainly tell my chain of command that ... If I didn’t think it was important, I would let folks know. I think it’s incredibly important.”