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U.N. fact-finders press for access to Guantanamo detainees

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MIAMI - Some United Nations fact-finders are seeking permission to visit Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and question U.S.-held captives there as part of a series of wide-ranging, international human rights investigations.

The U.N. special rapporteur for torture, Manfred Nowak, an Austrian, has been seeking to visit the base for 16 months, said Safir Syed, an assistant at the Geneva-based U.N. Human Rights Commission.

He made his first request to the Bush administration in January 2004 - before allegations surfaced of U.S. soldiers abusing prisoners at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq but about two years after the first prisoners arrived at Guantanamo Bay.

Since then, three other rapporteurs with special mandates to investigate human rights issues for the U.N. Commission on Human Rights have joined with Nowak in a request to visit the prison camp where the United States has held about 750 captives from at least 42 countries since it opened in January 2002. More than 200 have been released or sent to detention in other countries.

The U.S. ambassador-at-large for war crimes issues, Pierre-Richard Prosper, met on April 4 in Geneva with the rapporteurs, along with Michael Kozak, the U.S. acting assistant secretary for democracy, human rights and labor. They held "good discussions," according to a State Department communique.

Regarding the request for a visit, "No invitation was extended," the State Department said. But, "We are examining the request by the special rapporteurs to visit Guantanamo. During the meeting, we asked for further information from the special rapporteurs so that we can get a better understanding of the scope of the activities they wish to engage in."

Syed said from Geneva that the fact finders want to meet with U.S. officials there, question detainees without supervision, visit all the sites where they are held incommunicado and interrogated on the base and examine any relevant documents.

Access to the U.N. human rights officials would be a departure from usual U.S. policy.

Only delegates of the International Committee of the Red Cross have been permitted to see the detainees and their conditions.

Intelligence officials and diplomats from U.S.-ally countries have also met with the prisoners, ostensibly under U.S. supervision. Since August, other visitors have included several dozen U.S. civilian lawyers who have clients among the captives and Pentagon security clearances.

Special rapporteurs have been assigned to carry out investigations, without salary, on specific countries as well as specific themes. Themes have ranged from "extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions" to racism and violence against women. Their assignments last six years.

The U.N. commission has, for example, assigned rapporteurs or personal representatives to examine the situation in the Palestinian territories as well as in Cuba.

