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U.S. Denies Feeding-Tube Abuse

The U.S. military denies a claim that guards at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, are inserting filthy feeding tubes into hunger-strikers.

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In his on-again, off-again hunger strike at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, Saudi captive Yousef al Shehri says U.S. troops forced feeding tubes up his nose and into his stomach to keep him from starving himself.

But, his lawyer asserts, indignities suffered by her 21-year-old client did not end there.

Shehri told attorney Julia Tarver this month that U.S. forces -- not doctors or nurses -- have brutally inserted and removed feeding tubes, and on one occasion yanked a bloody tube out of one prisoner and put it up the nose and into the stomach of another, in the U.S. military effort to keep captives from starving themselves.

The Bush administration flatly denies the assertions and says the 505 or so suspected terrorists housed at Guantánamo get top-notch medical care.

But the Saudi's assertions are by far the most graphic allegations of abuse to emerge from the detention center as the U.S. military struggles to control protests that have bedeviled the prison since summertime: hunger strikes.

"These are baseless allegations," said Army Lt. Col. Bill Costello, spokesman at the Southern Command in Miami, on Friday. He said no independent investigation of the alleged mistreatment was planned.

Also Tuesday, the attorney for Kuwaiti captive Fawzi al Odeh, 28, told The Associated Press that his client wants a court to order the military to remove his feeding tube and let him die. Lawyer Thomas Wilner described his client as in despair after nearly three years in U.S. custody, but said he had not filed for the court order because al Odeh's parents disagree with the request.

Wilner describes his client's condition as deteriorating; prison camp spokesmen say all of the two dozen or so hunger-strikers are stable.

Medical staff at the camp have described the tube-feedings as a medical necessity. Doctors and nurses have said they ethically cannot stand by and permit a patient to commit suicide.

In a declaration filed by Tarver in U.S. District Court in a habeas corpus petition seeking the release of 10 Saudi captives, she portrays a zealous guard force on the eve of the Ramadan holiday in late September or early October mistreating prisoners on feeding tubes.

The commander of medical treatment there disputes the allegations in a U.S. affidavit.

"Doctors and registered nurses carefully and continuously evaluate the health of all detainees being tube-fed," said Navy Capt. John Edmondson, who oversees medical care for captives as well as sailors, soldiers, contractors and their families.

To bolster its case that the detainees are lying, the Justice Department submitted to the court an alleged al Qaeda training manual that says followers are taught to invent abuse allegations.

But Tarver quoted her client as describing detainees vomiting blood after doctors pumped too much liquid nutritional supplement into their stomachs: 'When they vomited up blood, the soldiers mocked and cursed them, and taunted them with statements like, 'Look what your religion has brought you.' "

Representatives of the American Medical Association Ethics Committee are expected to tour the base later this month, at the invitation of the Department of Defense, which boasts it provides detainees with model medical treatment.

It is not known if the AMA professionals will comment on what they see.

The court papers offer a sort of he-said, she-said on the forced-feeding policy:

- Shehri told Tarver that, to punish detainees, the military for a time inserted oversized tubes "the thickness of a finger" to feed him, through his nose, down his throat and into his stomach.

Edmondson said that for two days in September, the military used 4.8-millimeter tubes that met Federal Bureau of Prison standards to try to feed the detainees faster, then for their comfort went back to 3-millimeter tubes.

- Shehri told Tarver of a specific episode of guards yanking tubes out of the nose of one detainee and then inserting it, unsanitized, into the nose of another.

Edmondson said only military nurses and doctors insert and remove feeding tubes. He said he had done it himself, adding, "Nasogastric tubes are not and were not ever inserted into one patient then used again in another patient."

Like all but four of the more than 500 detainees at Guantánamo, Shehri has not been charged with a crime and is being held indefinitely as an "enemy combatant."