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Lawyers describe Guantanamo detainees

SAM HANANEL
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WASHINGTON -- Two defense lawyers who met recently with about a dozen Kuwaitis held at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, said Wednesday the men appeared emaciated and complained of physical abuse, humiliation and torture.

"These men are startlingly thin," said Kristine Huskey, one of the lawyers representing the men in a lawsuit challenging their confinement.

A Pentagon spokesman, Lt. Cmdr. Flex Plexico, would not immediately comment on the allegations of abuse but said the guards give the men regular meals and are "dedicated to providing excellent health care to the detainees."

The attorneys were allowed to interview their clients for the first time since the Supreme Court ruled last June that foreigners detained as enemy combatants at Guantanamo could challenge their imprisonment in U.S. courts.

At a news conference, Huskey and attorney Thomas Wilner said they could provide only overall impressions from their meetings under government rules requiring all attorney-client conversations to remain classified until authorities approve their release. Huskey interviewed the Kuwaitis the week after Christmas while Wilner visited Guantanamo last week.

Huskey said all the detainees claimed they had been abused. She declined to provide examples, citing the government rules, but she did describe taunting by guards and a lack of proper medical treatment. In one case, she said, a Muslim detainee watched as a guard threw a Quran in the toilet.

Huskey said several detainees told her people have come into their cells claiming to be their lawyers and trying to extract information from them.

"Obviously, this is very shocking to us," Huskey said.

Government documents released last month show FBI agents sent to Guantanamo in 2002 reported some interrogators were being abusive, inserting lit cigarettes in prisoners' ears and shackling them into a fetal positions for hours.

The Army, which is responsible for overseeing the prisoners, says it is investigating the allegations. However, officials maintain that most incidents occurred in 2002 when the prison was just opening, and that some of the interrogation techniques labeled as "aggressive" no longer are in use.

The Kuwaitis told the attorneys they have been kept for nearly three years in stark 9-by-5-foot cells. They are allowed outside for about 45 minutes a week and given no reading materials other than the Quran for brief periods.

"The way that these men are being held, the conditions of confinement are worse than those for the worst convicted murder or rapist in the United States," Wilner said.

Some 550 detainees from more than 40 countries are held in the naval base as "enemy combatants." About 200 have been released.