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Long-Term Plan Sought For Terror Suspects

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Administration officials are preparing long-range plans for indefinitely imprisoning suspected terrorists whom they do not want to set free or turn over to courts in the United States or other countries, according to intelligence, defense and diplomatic officials.

The Pentagon and the CIA have asked the White House to decide on a more permanent approach for potentially lifetime detentions, including for hundreds of people now in military and CIA custody whom the government does not have enough evidence to charge in courts. The outcome of the review, which also involves the State Department, would also affect those expected to be captured in the course of future counterterrorism operations.

"We've been operating in the moment because that's what has been required," said a senior administration official involved in the discussions, who said the current detention system has strained relations between the United States and other countries. "Now we can take a breath. We have the ability and need to look at long-term solutions."

One proposal under review is the transfer of large numbers of Afghan, Saudi and Yemeni detainees from the military's Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, detention center into new U.S.-built prisons in their home countries. The prisons would be operated by those countries, but the State Department, where this idea originated, would ask them to abide by recognized human rights standards and would monitor compliance, the senior administration official said.

As part of a solution, the Defense Department, which holds 500 prisoners at Guantanamo Bay, plans to ask Congress for \$25 million to build a 200-bed prison to hold detainees who are unlikely to ever go through a military tribunal for lack of evidence, according to defense officials.

The new prison, dubbed Camp 6, would allow inmates more comfort and freedom than they have now, and would be designed for prisoners the government believes have no more intelligence to share, the officials said. It would be modeled on a U.S. prison and would allow socializing among inmates.

"Since global war on terror is a long-term effort, it makes sense for us to be looking at solutions for long-term problems," said Bryan Whitman, a Pentagon spokesman. "This has been evolutionary, but we are at a point in time where we have to say, 'How do you deal with them in the long term?'"

The administration considers its toughest detention problem to involve the prisoners held by the CIA. The CIA has been scurrying since Sept. 11, 2001, to find secure locations abroad where it could detain and interrogate captives without risk of discovery, and without having to give them access to legal proceedings.

Little is known about the CIA's captives, the conditions under which they are kept -- or the procedures used to decide how long they are held or when they may be freed. That has prompted criticism from human rights groups, and from some in Congress and the administration, who say the lack of scrutiny or oversight creates an unacceptable risk of abuse.

Rep. Jane Harman (D-Calif.), vice chairman of the House intelligence committee who has received classified briefings on the CIA's detainees and interrogation methods, said that given the long-term nature of the detention situation, "I think there should be a public debate about whether the entire system should be secret.

"The details about the system may need to remain secret," Harman said. At the least, she said, detainees should be registered so that their treatment can be tracked and monitored within the government. "This is complicated. We don't want to set up a bureaucracy that ends up making it impossible to protect sources and informants who operate within the groups we want to penetrate."

The CIA is believed to be holding fewer than three dozen al Qaeda leaders in prison. The agency holds most, if not all, of the top captured al Qaeda leaders, including Khalid Sheik Mohammed, Ramzi Binalshibh, Abu Zubaida and the lead Southeast Asia terrorist, Nurjaman Riduan Isamuddin, known as Hambali.

CIA detention facilities have been located on an off-limits corner of the Bagram air base in Afghanistan, on ships at sea and on Britain's Diego Garcia island in the Indian Ocean. The Washington Post reported last month that the CIA has also maintained a facility within the Pentagon's Guantanamo Bay complex, though it is unclear whether it is still in use.

In contrast to the CIA, the military produced and declassified hundreds of pages of documents about its detention and interrogation procedures after the Abu Ghraib prison scandal. And the military detainees are guaranteed access to the International Committee of the Red Cross and, as a result of a U.S. Supreme Court ruling, have the right to challenge their imprisonment in federal court.

But no public hearings in Congress have been held on CIA detention practices, and congressional officials say CIA briefings on the subject have been too superficial and were limited to the chairman and vice chairman of the House and Senate intelligence committees.

The CIA had floated a proposal to build an isolated prison with the intent of keeping it secret, one intelligence official said. That was dismissed immediately as impractical.

One approach used by the CIA has been to transfer captives it picks up abroad to third countries willing to hold them indefinitely and without public proceedings. The transfers, called "renditions," depend on arrangements between the United States and other countries, such as Egypt, Jordan and Afghanistan, that agree to have local security services hold certain terror suspects in their facilities for interrogation by CIA and foreign liaison officers.

The practice has been criticized by civil liberties groups and others, who point out that some of the countries have human rights records that are criticized by the State Department in annual reports.

Renditions originated in the 1990s as a way of picking up criminals abroad, such as drug kingpins, and delivering them to courts in the United States or other countries. Since 2001, the practice has been used to make certain detainees do not go to court or go back on the streets, officials said.

"The whole idea has become a corruption of renditions," said one CIA officer who has been involved in the practice. "It's not rendering to justice, it's kidnapping."

But top intelligence officials and other experts, including former CIA director George J. Tenet in his testimony before Congress, say renditions are an effective method of disrupting terrorist cells and persuading detainees to reveal information.

"Renditions are the most effective way to hold people," said Rohan Gunaratna, author of "Inside al Qaeda: Global Network of Terror." "The threat of sending someone to one of these countries is very important. In Europe, the custodial interrogations have yielded almost nothing" because they do not use the threat of sending detainees to a country where they are likely to be tortured.