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Allies' Nationals Gone From Camps

A Miami Herald analysis of a Pentagon roster of captives at Guantánamo finds that the prison's population has markedly changed in two years.

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Miami Herald
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Camps hold largely Arabs

Ok. Thanks. Ok. Thanks.

Guantánamo's captive population today is overwhelmingly natives of Arab nations and Afghanistan after the United States sent home nearly every detainee from its Western allies in the war on terrorism, an analysis of a newly released Pentagon roster of detainees reveals.

The Miami Herald used announcements of prisoner releases to update the 2004 Pentagon roster of Guantánamo captives, and found that the Bush administration thinned the prison population by more than 60 -- sending home almost every Western-born captive.

As a result, nearly half the captives now held at the detention center for suspected terrorists hail from Osama bin Laden's native and ancestral homelands, Saudi Arabia (128) and Yemen (106). Afghanistan came in third with 97 captives.

The analysis provides the fullest demographic picture so far at the 4-year-old prison camps on the U.S. Navy base in southeast Cuba.

The Miami Herald accounted for the current prison population by subtracting from the list about 65 captives from 20 nations who have been sent home since the roster was created two years ago.

That leaves the number of prisoners at Guantánamo today at about 490. The prisoners were born in 35 countries plus the still-disputed, semi-autonomous Palestinian West Bank. They are overwhelmingly Arab and South Asian, with a smattering of Muslims from former Soviet republics.

GLOBAL POLITICS

"It's long been clear that there's a double standard for developing-country detainees versus our Western allies," said Anthony Romero, executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union, which has sued the Bush administration for details of detention center practices.

"They're more willing to run the gantlet with the Saudis and the Yemenis and the Afghans than they are with the British and the French," he said. ``So Gitmo is a reflection of the geopolitics of the war on terror."

Until the Pentagon posted the 11-page roster on its Defenselink website late Wednesday, the Pentagon had resisted for more than a year complying with a Freedom of Information lawsuit brought by the Associated Press.

The administration had argued that so-called enemy combatants were entitled to anonymity out of privacy concerns -- despite the fact that hundreds are suing the United States for false imprisonment through habeas corpus petitions in U.S. District Court.

The list contained no obvious surprises -- no previously unknown, so-called high-value captives. It does include the 10 men now held at Guantánamo who are facing war-crimes trials by a Military Commission system under review by the Supreme Court.

It also includes the names of more than a dozen so-called nonenemy combatants, without distinguishing them from terror suspects.

Captive No. 283 on the list, for example, is Abu Bakr Qassem, a Chinese citizen from that communist country's Muslim minority Uighur population who is no longer categorized as an "enemy combatant" -- and whom a U.S. District Court judge has declared unlawfully detained. Yet the list does not distinguish him from the other terror suspects.

U.S. military panels investigating the 558 captives named in the list concluded that 38 of the captives were inappropriately caught in the worldwide net that started in January 2002, when suspected radical Muslim terrorists were funneled to Bagram, Afghanistan -- and then by air bridge to the prison camps overlooking the Caribbean.

KEY SUSPECTS MISSING

Moreover, the roster does not include the top echelon of U.S.-held war-on-terror captives -- Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and Ramsi Bin al-Shibh -- considered key architects of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks that precipitated the U.S. war on terror and the opening of the detention center in Cuba. It is not known where those two are being held or interrogated.

Since military officers drew up the list in mid-2004, the Bush administration has negotiated the repatriation of all the Europeans on the list and thinned the population of Afghan citizens swept up in the battlefield by 22 percent.

The remaining detainees are for the most part Persian Gulf Arabs, South Asians and northern Africans -- plus a curious population of up to 22 Uighurs, members of a Muslim minority in China. U.S. policy prevents the Uighurs being repatriated out of fear they may be tortured or oppressed for their religion.

Unlike two years ago, when the list was drawn up, Guantánamo today has only two Western nationals -- David Hicks of Australia and Omar Khadr of Canada -- plus several other captives claiming long residency in England and Germany.

The majority of "enemy combatants" held there today come from unstable, often war-torn countries for whom the United States might not be able to safely negotiate repatriation or be assured that they will be monitored or imprisoned at home.

Not until now has it been reported that the fourth-ranking nationality in the Guantánamo camps -- totaling 25 -- comes from Algeria, whose democratic elections in the 1990s were subsequently invalidated, unleashing a radical Islamic regime and at times wary relations between Washington and Algiers.

In addition, 27 come from nations on the State Department's list of state sponsors of terrorism: Libya, Syria and Sudan, where the government is allegedly carrying out a war of genocide in Darfur.