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Tours Put Prison Camp in Positive Light

Guantanamo Bay | Visiting media see soft rugs, recliners, hear about humane interrogation tactics

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GUANTANAMO BAY NAVAL BASE, Cuba -- Military-intelligence teams have added a faux Persian carpet and blue velour Lazy Boy recliner to an interrogation room at the cement-block prison for high-value terrorism suspects here.

The cozier touches, where an austere office table and chairs once stood, nearly hide the iron ring where a captive's legs are shackled to the floor.

Why the new interior design for detainees suspected of ties to terrorism?

Interrogators "understand their culture. They want them to feel comfortable," said an Army psychologist, a lieutenant colonel who consults here on how to get useful intelligence from those among the nearly 500 detainees still being questioned.

America's offshore detention center where suspected terrorists are housed and interrogated is in its fifth year.

And so is the weekly tour for the news media, a carefully choreographed opportunity to peek inside the prison camps and see what Navy Cmdr. Catie Hanft describes as "safe, secure and humane detention."

Military commanders such as Hanft have briefed reporters on a programmed tour virtually every week since the captives began arriving from Afghanistan in January 2002. The journalists photograph Filipino contract workers cooking Muslim meals, interview guards and anonymous Navy doctors, get a glimpse of construction -- and sometimes watch military review boards.

No detainees have ever been permitted to talk to reporters.

The gentler images of the prison -- there are a coffee pot and mini-fridge in the interrogation room, too -- serve as a stark contrast to the early images of captives in open-air cages at Camp X-Ray and the reports from a leaked 2002 interrogation log.

Those reports told how interrogators applied stress techniques to break Saudi captive Mohammed Qahtani -- leaving him chained naked to the floor, in his own excrement, and blasting him with music.

"We don't do that," said an Army psychologist who spoke briefly with reporters, and was asked whether the military still implements the so-called "esteem-up, esteem-down" interrogation tactics that humiliate.

In fact, last week the White House dismissed as "a rehash of allegations" a report by U.N. human-rights investigators calling on the United States to close the prison and to end what the report characterized as violent treatment that amounts to torture.

Instead, the psychologist said, mental-health experts on the so-called Behavioral Science Consultation Team (colloquially called "biscuit") advise interrogators to be honest and patient, to

develop rapport with the men the Pentagon has described as the worst of the worst of al-Qaida and Taliban suspects.

Hence the recliner and rug in the Camp Five interrogation room.

Briefers still won't say how many captives are spilling secrets.

But one Navy commander here said the review panels evaluating the intelligence value of Guantanamo's detainees have concluded that at least a quarter of the captives -- as many as 136 -- can go home, be resettled or transferred to a lockup in their native lands.

Until then, about half of the captives live in barracks-style housing in Camp Four, a more traditional POW-camp arrangement that is considered a pre-release site, complete with communal meals and prayer.

"Lying does not work," said the Army psychologist, a 12-year veteran whom the prison commander, Maj. Gen. Jay Hood, sent to tell reporters how interrogators handle the men.

Hanft, the senior naval officer in charge of prison guards, said 93 percent of the detainees at Camp Delta are "compliant," meaning they abide by the rules.

It was unclear whether the noncompliant figure -- which calculates to roughly 35 captives -- includes the rotating band of hunger strikers who, after refusing nine consecutive meals, are shackled to a bed in a Navy hospital, a feeding tube inserted into their noses to provide nutrition.

And the media tours continue, featuring a three-night stay and a stop at a commissary where, as if to underscore the theme, there's a \$9.99 T-shirt on sale declaring Guantanamo Bay the "Taliban Towers - - the Caribbean's newest 5-star resort."

Escorting a group through a portion of the prison last month, Hanft told a Voice of America reporter that America should be proud of what the military is doing here.

Then just before departing, she hopped on their mini-bus with a thank you and a wagging finger.

"Say nice things!" she said.