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Gitmo Truth of Fiction?

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GUANTANAMO BAY, Cuba -- The bearded prisoner in an orange jumpsuit waved his arms as frantically as a castaway trying to flag a boat on the horizon.

"Problem every day!" he screamed in broken English from an exercise cage in a steaming hot courtyard. "Everybody sick here! No medicine! No doctor! Not enough food!"

A few miles and several roadblocks away, Brig. Gen. Jay W. Hood, who runs this island outpost in the war on terror, called the prisoner's accusations "Outrageous. Unfair. Inaccurate."

"If I could, I'd let my family into the cellblocks to see what we're doing here," Hood bristled. "A lot of people in the United States are a lot safer because of what we're doing in Guantanamo Bay."

Such colliding accusations are at the heart of a growing debate over whether to close detainee operations at Guantanamo, where the Pentagon is indefinitely holding some 520 foreign men without charge behind layers of chain-link fence and concertina wire in what Amnesty International has slammed as "the gulag of our time."

The extent to which national security interests may be superseding human rights was impossible to determine during a tightly controlled, 2½-day trip last week to the base on the southeast tip of Cuba, which included an exclusive glimpse of detainees inside their cells.

What was apparent was the despair of some inmates -- Muslim men from 44 countries whom the White House dubs "the worst of the worst" who paced and muttered in wire-mesh cells, like animals in cramped cages.

A sense of siege

What also emerged was a sense of siege.

Inside cellblocks, "the troops have feces and urine thrown at them all the time," said Navy Lt. Bruce Crouterfield, the base's Baptist chaplain.

"Troops who come through here feel like they're getting slugged in the chest when they should get patted on the back," said Crouterfield, who acknowledged he wouldn't flinch at the death penalty for some prisoners here. "But they have to come back to work every day and treat the Quran with respect and make sure the detainees' needs are met."

Descriptions of detainees hurling cocktails of feces and urine at guards, or spitting on them, were volunteered during almost every interview with military officials. The method is to "save up" human waste in Styrofoam food containers and launch them at opportune moments, they said. No feces or urine was evident during a two-minute walk through a cellblock that military escorts billed as a surprise visit. Camp commanders said that was because the cellblock's 31 inmates are among those classified as "moderately compliant."

The cellblock was inside Camp Delta, which in May 2002 replaced Camp X-Ray, made infamous for its open-air cells. Located out of view of the stunning, nearby Caribbean coastline and surrounded by fields of hibiscus and cactus, Camp Delta is dotted with watchtowers and enclosed

by layers of massive chain-link fences. Passing through each gate, military officials exchange the Guantanamo salute aimed at boosting morale in a mission under growing fire.

"Honor bound!" barks the lower-ranking enlistee, throwing right hand to temple.

"To defend freedom!" the officer replies in kind.

Most cellblocks in Camp Delta are rectangular prefab structures that from the outside resemble mobile homes. Prisoners are locked inside 8-by-6.8-foot cells that line both lengths of the prefabs and are separated by green, metal-mesh walls. Cell windows are open to the elements, covered only with the same mesh whose links are large enough to let in Guantanamo's ubiquitous gnats. Each cell has a squat-toilet and sink.

Inside one cellblock, a visitor saw prisoners clad in tan jumpsuits, to designate them "moderately compliant," and black flip-flops. Most were olive skinned and bearded. Each seemed in his own world, so much so that the place almost evoked an asylum for the mentally ill.

Rocking back and forth, one young man whispered what sounded like an Arabic prayer, adding to a hum of murmured monologues filling the cellblock. Another man walked around and around in a tiny circle with a blank stare on his face.

Some prisoners appeared startled to see a woman in civilian clothes. "Miss, please," one whispered in English, his face pressed near the wire mesh separating him from the corridor. A military escort whisked the reporter ahead before he could finish his thought.

A few cells down, an old man lay on a thin mattress on his metal bed, his face frozen into a grotesque grin, as he clutched the wire-mesh wall with one hand.

One inmate had written reams of Arabic on his toilet paper in beautiful, tiny script, then rolled it back up.

Prisoners appeared less distraught in a tour of another section of Camp Delta that houses the best-behaved detainees, who wear white uniforms, share larger, group cells and spend most of the day outdoors. Viewed in their courtyard from afar, the prisoners strolled casually or sat at outdoor tables, reading or playing checkers or cards. Unlike less "compliant" prisoners, they get unlimited bottled water and play ping-pong. They also occasionally watch movies or pre-recorded soccer matches from their homelands. There's even weekly ice cream.

Daily meals

All detainees get three daily meals prepared according to Halal religious specifications for Muslims. They cost the government \$12.68 a day, compared with \$8.65 for U.S. troop meals. Entrees include honey-glazed chicken, ginger beef patties and lemon-baked fish. Even the worst behaved, commanders say, get basic toiletries, along with a prayer mat, a Quran and an arrow taped in their cell that points toward Mecca.

Their cells -- pre-selected for viewing by military officials -- appeared tidy and far more pleasant than those in many developing countries. There was no sign of the mistreatment alleged in an array of leaked or declassified government documents and accounts from defense lawyers and freed inmates.

The Pentagon has launched a probe of Guantanamo as a result of those allegations. Among them: that some prisoners have been threatened with dogs, awakened hourly to deprive them of sleep, shackled in excruciating positions, left chained to the floor for hours or even days in their own excrement, run like human mops through urine, wrapped in Israeli flags, forced to hear insults about Islam, threatened with rape, taunted by scantily clad women, or brutally "IRFed" --

held down and unnecessarily pummeled by five-member military teams in riot gear known as Initial Reaction Forces.

Hood admitted there had been "isolated" incidents, most of them accidental, including the five occasions in which guards or interrogators kicked, stepped on and splashed urine on the Quran. But Hood and other ranking officials adamantly denied any systemic misconduct.

Detainees' allegations of mistreatment, such as that of the prisoner shouting in the courtyard who was clad in orange -- the color designating him among the "least compliant" -- are lifted from terror manuals that instruct them to invent abuse, the officials said.

Guantanamo officials did not rebut a graphic account published this month in Time magazine of interrogation methods used against a detainee believed to have been dispatched as the 20th hijacker in the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. Citing Guantanamo logs and FBI memos, the article reported the detainee had been threatened with dogs, deprived of sleep, forced to strip, forced to wear photos of naked women around his neck, and placed in isolation for months.

However, Esteban Rodriguez, the Defense Department official who heads interrogations here, said that detainee was the only Guantanamo inmate subjected to a series of harsher interrogation techniques for select detainees that Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld approved in late 2002 but retracted in early 2003.

Stemming abuse

Since taking command of the base's detainee operations 15 months ago, Hood has launched several measures to stem the potential for prisoner abuse, including surprise inspections of detention facilities. Still, some conflicting statements from camp officials left a nagging impression that all might not be well at Guantanamo.

For example, Rodriguez denied detainees were held in solitary confinement. Yet at Camp 5, a new, 100-bed prison next to Delta for detainees of the highest intelligence value, each inmate is placed in a cell with solid walls. The narrow windows on their doors are equipped with covers that can shut out the view of the corridor.

The interrogation rooms at Camp 5 have sound-proof paneling and built-in hooks to shackle those being questioned.

Several lawmakers, joined by former President Jimmy Carter, have recently called for Guantanamo's closure. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Vice President Dick Cheney have scoffed at the notion.

On Friday the government announced it had awarded a \$30 million contract to a subsidiary of Houston-based Halliburton, the oil services group once led by Cheney, to build an additional, 220-bed, prison here. That subsidiary also built Camp Delta.