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Force-Feeding at Guantanamo Is Now Acknowledged

ERIC SCHMITT and TIM GOLDEN
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WASHINGTON, Feb. 21 -- The military commander responsible for the American detention center at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, confirmed Tuesday that officials there last month turned to more aggressive methods to deter prisoners who were carrying out long-term hunger strikes to protest their incarceration.

The commander, Gen. Bantz J. Craddock, head of the United States Southern Command, said soldiers at Guantanamo began strapping some of the detainees into "restraint chairs" to force-feed them and isolate them from one another after finding that some were deliberately vomiting or siphoning out the liquid they had been fed.

"It was causing problems because some of these hard-core guys were getting worse," General Craddock said at a breakfast meeting with reporters. Explaining the use of the restraint chairs, he added, "The way around that is you have to make sure that purging doesn't happen."

After The New York Times reported Feb. 9 that the military had begun using restraint chairs and other harsh methods, military spokesmen insisted that the procedures for dealing with the hunger strikes at Guantanamo had not changed. They also said they could not confirm that the chairs had been used.

On Tuesday, General Craddock said he had reviewed the use of the restraint chairs, as had senior officials at the Department of Defense, and they concluded that the practice was "not inhumane." General Craddock left no doubt, however, that commanders had decided to try to make life less comfortable for the hunger strikers, and that the measures were seen as successful.

"Pretty soon it wasn't convenient, and they decided it wasn't worth it," he said of the hunger strikers. "A lot of the detainees said: 'I don't want to put up with this. This is too much of a hassle.'"

A spokesman for the Southern Command, Lt. Col. James Marshall, said that restraint chairs had been used in the feeding of 35 of the detainees so far, and that 3 were still being fed that way. He said the number of prisoners refusing to eat had fallen from 41 on Dec. 15 -- when the restraint chairs were first used on a trial basis -- to 5, according to a military spokesman.

Military officials have said the tough measures were necessary to keep detainees from dying. But while many of the strikers lost between 15 and 20 percent of their normal body weight, only a few were thought to be in immediate medical danger, two officers familiar with the strike said.

Lawyers for the detainees and several human rights groups have assailed the new methods used against the hunger strikers as inhumane, and as unjustified by the reported medical condition of the prisoners.

According to newly declassified interview notes, several detainees who had been on hunger strikes told their lawyers during visits late last month that the military had begun using harsher methods more widely in the second week of January. One Yemeni detainee, Emad Hassan, described the chair to lawyers in interviews on Jan. 24 and 25.

"The head is immobilized by a strap so it can't be moved, their hands are cuffed to the chair and the legs are shackled," the notes quote Mr. Hassan as saying. "They ask, 'Are you going to eat or not?' and if not, they insert the tube. People have been urinating and defecating on themselves in these feedings and vomiting and bleeding. They ask to be allowed to go to the bathroom, but they will not let them go. They have sometimes put diapers on them."

Another former hunger striker, Isa al-Murbati of Bahrain, described a similar experience to his lawyer, Joshua Colangelo-Bryan, in an interview on Jan. 28.

On Jan. 10, he said, a lieutenant came to his isolation cell and told him that if he did not agree to eat solid food, he would be strapped into the chair and force-fed. After he refused to comply, he said, soldiers picked him up by the throat, threw him to the floor and strapped him to the restraint chair.

Like Mr. Hassan, Mr. Murbati said he had been fed two large bags of liquid formula, which were forced into his stomach very quickly. "He felt pain like a 'knife in the stomach' " Mr. Colangelo-Bryan said.

Detainees said the Guantanamo medical staff also began inserting and removing the long plastic feeding tubes that were threaded through the detainees' nasal passages and into their stomachs at every feeding, a practice that caused sharp pain and frequent bleeding, they said. Until then, doctors there said, they had been allowing the hunger strikers to leave their feeding tubes in, to reduce discomfort.

Military spokesmen have generally discounted the complaints, saying the prisoners are for the most part terrorists, trained by Al Qaeda to use false stories as propaganda.

In a letter to a British physician and human rights activist, Dr. David J. Nicholl, on Dec. 12, the former chief medical officer at Guantanamo, Capt. John S. Edmondson of the Navy, wrote that his staff was not force-feeding any detainees but "providing nutritional supplementation on a voluntary basis to detainees who wish to protest their confinement by not taking oral nourishment."

General Craddock suggested that the medical staff had indulged the hunger strikers to the point that they had been allowed to choose the color of their feeding tubes.

Two other Defense Department officials said a decision had been made to try to break the hunger strikes because they were having a disruptive effect and causing stress for the medical staff.

That effort was stepped up, one official said, in January, when Captain Edmondson left Guantanamo for a new post after receiving a Legion of Merit Medal for "inspiring leadership and exemplary performance."