

The following text may be printed, copy/pasted, or downloaded and emailed.

Guantánamo Thorny Issue for Democrats on Committee

NEIL A. LEWIS
New York Times
June 30, 2005

WASHINGTON - A hearing before the House Armed Services Committee on Wednesday provided a stark display of how Democrats and Republicans are reacting in different ways to accusations about abuse at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba.

For Republicans, the mission was simple and direct: defend the military's detention center at Guantánamo as humane and deserving of admiration throughout the world.

For some Democrats, the task was more complicated: to praise the patriotism and work of the vast majority of military personnel at Guantánamo, while raising questions about abuse of detainees.

Representative Duncan Hunter, a California Republican who is the committee chairman, suggested in his questioning of Brig. Gen. Jay Hood, the Guantánamo commander, that it was probably the finest military detention facility in history. Mr. Hunter led a hastily arranged delegation of 16 committee members to Guantánamo on Saturday.

"What we saw was not the 'gulag of our times,' " Mr. Hunter said, referring to recent criticism from Amnesty International. It was, instead, "a world-class detention facility where detainees representing a threat to our national security are well fed, given access to top-notch medical facilities and provided an opportunity to obtain legal representation."

The trip and Wednesday's hearing were planned as a response to increasing calls to shut down the Guantánamo facility.

Representative Ike Skelton of Missouri, the panel's ranking Democrat, said that Guantánamo was in many ways better than state and federal penitentiaries and that he "applauds every American service member who serves honorably at that facility."

But, Mr. Skelton continued, focusing on issues of food and medical treatment missed the point, which he identified as the accusations of unfair treatment of detainees "noted by those who would recruit terrorists to fight against us and by people throughout the Muslim world."

He said that for the sake of the country's international credibility, "an independent commission is essential to stem the accusations and doubts of Muslims around the world."

Cmdr. Cary Ostergaard, who runs the detainee hospital at Guantánamo and was also a witness, disputed reports that information in patients' medical files had been used to help interrogators. But Commander Ostergaard said that he could discuss only the role of medical personnel who treat detainees for illnesses and that he had no role in assembling or overseeing the teams of military doctors who have advised interrogators on how best to conduct their questioning.

Former interrogators interviewed for a recent article in The New York Times have said that psychologists and psychiatrists, acting as behavioral scientists, advised them on how to use weaknesses, like a fear of the dark, to press detainees into cooperating. The New England Journal of Medicine reported last week that interviews with doctors who set up the interrogations at Guantánamo had used a model of increasing stress on detainees rather than establishing rapport to elicit information.

General Hood, in his testimony, said it was important to remember that the vast majority of Guantánamo detainees were "dangerous men committed to harming Americans."