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U.S. Military Plans to Move Detainees Out of Abu Ghraib

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BAGHDAD, Iraq, March 9 — The American military announced plans today to move all its detainees out of Abu Ghraib prison, the sprawling penal compound west of Baghdad that became notorious throughout the world in 2004 after photographs were made public of American soldiers abusing Iraqi prisoners there.

The prison will be turned over to the Iraqi government after the 4,500-odd prisoners being held there are moved, probably within about three months, to another prison now being built in Baghdad, military officials said.

The military had previously indicated it was considering a move out of Abu Ghraib largely because the prison is the target of frequent insurgent attacks and requires an unusual degree of protection. But today's announcement, by Lt. Col. Keir-Kevin Curry, a military spokesman in Baghdad, was the first definitive word of a plan and time frame.

The transfer also will remove the American military from the site of one of the most damaging scandals it has ever faced. The images of Iraqi detainees being beaten and sexually humiliated at the prison became a touchstone for Arab and Muslim rage against the United States in the spring of 2004, and a potent recruiting tool for insurgents in Iraq and elsewhere.

The prison complex was also a widely feared center for torture and execution under Saddam Hussein. After the fall of his government in 2003, there were calls for it to be demolished. But members of Iraq's governing council — including one who had been imprisoned there for 13 years — resisted, saying it was needed as a prison.

After the prisoner abuse scandal became public in 2004, President Bush also proposed to raze the Abu Ghraib complex, but an American military judge ordered that it be preserved as a crime scene.

Nine American soldiers were ultimately found guilty in the Abu Ghraib abuse case, which also prompted a number of military and Congressional investigations.

Several high-ranking Iraqi officials said they were unaware of the American plans to move prisoners out of Abu Ghraib, or of any Iraqi plans for the complex after it is transferred. The American military's timeline for moving out of the prison coincides roughly with the formation of a new full-term government, which is now under way and is expected to take at least another two months.

"Perhaps we should make it into a school or a hospital," said Adnan Pachachi, the former foreign minister who is a member of Iraq's new Parliament. "It symbolized the mentality of Saddam Hussein, and then it also became the symbol of everything that went wrong during the occupation."

American military officials said the schedule for transferring prisoners out of Abu Ghraib was loose, and would depend on the construction of a new building to house them. That facility is being built at Camp Cropper, a prison on the military base at Baghdad's airport where so-called "high-value detainees" are now housed, including Mr. Hussein and his closest aides.

The military also runs two other prisons for detainees suspected of insurgent activity, with a total of 14,589 inmates in all four facilities, Colonel Curry said. One is Fort Suse, north of the capital, and the other is Camp Bucca, the largest prison, in southern Iraq.

Currently, all detainees are processed at Abu Ghraib, and a small number are released immediately. The rest are held or transferred to other prisons. The Abu Ghraib complex includes a number of buildings, and until recently Iraq's Justice Ministry maintained a detention center there for ordinary criminals, separate from the American military center.

The prison abuse scandal at Abu Ghraib forced a number of changes in the American detainee system in Iraq. Investigations found that there had been a shortage of professional interrogators to handle the surging number of detainees, and units inside Abu Ghraib had turned to untrained military policemen and policewomen for help. American military officials have said they now have enough interrogators, and efforts have been made to weed out detainees who obviously do not belong in prison.

But the number of detainees has continued to grow, posing serious challenges for the system. There are now almost twice as many detainees as there were a year ago in the four major American prisons in Iraq. Abu Ghraib is operating above its capacity level, Colonel Curry said.

There have been signs of stress at Abu Ghraib and elsewhere over the past year. Riots have broken out at Camp Bucca, the largest prison, including at least one in which a detainee was killed. Last year prison officials at Camp Bucca discovered two tunnels, one of them 600 feet long, running from beneath the floorboards of a detainee tent to the exterior of the camp. The tunnels were discovered just before a planned escape attempt.

The American military has accelerated the release of detainees in recent months. But many are held for several months before the cases even go before a review board. Human rights groups have sharply criticized the system, saying the military has violated international law by holding prisoners indefinitely and often without charges or access to a lawyer or even their families.

Abu Ghraib, however, has always been in a category of its own. The prison sits in an area just west of Baghdad that was known for violent resistance to the American presence even before the prison scandal became public.

"Clearly there's a lot of emotion attached to Abu Ghraib," said Lt. Col. Barry Johnson, another military spokesman. "For Iraqis, it dates back a lot further than abuses committed by American soldiers, and it makes it a magnet for attacks."

Insurgents have launched a number of attacks on the prison, some of them apparently intended to free prisoners. In one attack last April, 40 to 60 insurgents mounted a coordinated assault using two suicide car bombs, as well as mortars, rocket-propelled grenades and machine guns. Thirteen detainees and 23 American service members were wounded in the attack, which lasted two hours. Less than two days later, another suicide bomber — this one in a tractor — struck the prison, wounding five people.