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Pentagon's Guantanamo prison at a crossroads

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Miami Herald

January 10, 2005

GUANTANAMO BAY NAVAL BASE, Cuba - A federal judge has halted the first U.S. war crimes trial since World War II. An Army general is investigating FBI accounts of abusive interrogations. And the intelligence chief here says the majority of inmates have no more information to offer.

Today, three years after the first al-Qaida and Taliban suspects arrived here, the Pentagon's offshore prison for terror suspects is at a crossroads: Under review by civilian courts, short on funding for an ambitious consolidation plan, and tarred by the worst torture scandal to confront the Bush administration.

And behind-the-scenes planning suggests a much reduced future that would consolidate today's sprawling, mostly open-air 2,000-cell detention center into one concrete 300-cell compound.

"Where this will go four or five years down the road, I don't know," said Army Brig Gen. Jay Hood, the fifth prison commander.

Hood is awaiting some \$30 million in Congressional funding for the building blocks of a long-term stay - a 12-bed psychiatric ward, the 200-cell concrete prison and state-of-the art, sensor-monitored fence. Combined, the changes would reduce the Pentagon's need to bring in hundreds of reservists on six-month rotations from National Guard units across the United States.

Meantime, Navy-run parole boards are just beginning to decide who should be released. They have begun sifting through the 550 or so detainees from 42 nations, mostly rounded up in Afghanistan, to decide which are safe enough to send home after up to three years in crude 7-by-8-foot cells.

It all began as an experiment of sorts on Jan. 11, 2002, when the first 20 prisoners arrived in this sweltering corner of Cuba from an overwhelmed, freezing warfront in Afghanistan, 8,000 miles away.

American intelligence had been caught flat-footed by the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks, four months to the day earlier. Commanders created the prison in hopes of getting the opportunity to systematically interrogate captives, mostly rounded up by allies in Pakistan and Afghanistan, while remaining outside the constraints of U.S. laws.

Human rights and international law experts immediately cried foul, arguing the prison stripped captives of war-time protections.

In an analysis published this week of the prison's three years, Amnesty International brands it "an icon of lawlessness" and protests everything from the detainees' psychological deterioration to alleged torture authorized by the Bush administration here.

About 750 captives have been held at the base - some 200 later set free or transferred to lockups in their homelands. And for three years, soldiers mostly shrouded the project in secrecy, allowing only tightly guided media tours and few outsiders.

Critics and proponents of the prison debate the value of interrogations that have gone on for so long.

Critics argue that al-Qaida cells long ago changed plans, safehouses, even identities to render irrelevant whatever bits of information that captives here might divulge through protracted interrogation. The terror trail, they say, grows cold.

Not so, says intelligence chief Steve Rodriguez, who in a recent interview defended interrogations here as not only humane, but still valuable to learn how terror networks work.

After sorting through the prisoners "the majority of the individuals here are not of intelligence interest to me," Rodriguez said, declining to say whether they had nothing to offer in the first place or had been fully debriefed.

But repeated interrogations of a select few are still yielding what the military calls "actionable intelligence" - information that can help unmask ongoing terror operations around the world.

An example: A recent interrogation uncovered a previously unknown al-Qaida cell in another country, Rodriguez said. He would not identify the country or provide any other details to help independently verify the claim.

Rodriguez refused to quantify the minority of prisoners still worth interrogating. But a recent media tour may have provided a clue: Only 50 of the 550 detainees are kept in a separate prison wing reserved for "high value" captives.

Meantime, the Pentagon is plunging forward with long-term plans to professionalize the operation.

Army Lt. Col. Kevin Burk arrived here in August to establish a permanent, 324-member guard force. In place of military police reservists called up from civilian life, Burk's 525 MP Battalion guards are being drawn from full-time soldiers now guarding U.S. military prisons such as Fort Leavenworth, Kan.

The new guard force is the first major change to operations here in months that was not forced by the federal courts.

The Supreme Court ruled this summer that detainees are entitled to sue for their freedom in U.S. courts, which has spawned 50 or so habeas corpus petitions. Since then, about a dozen Guantanamo captives here have met with civilian U.S. lawyers - ending a two-year Pentagon ban.

In November, U.S. Judge James Robertson declared unconstitutional Guantanamo's showcase war-crimes trial of Osama bin Laden driver Salim Hamdan, 34. The judge found that the Bush administration both brushed aside its Geneva Convention obligations and did not provide enough prisoner protections when it created Military Commissions that used a pick-and-choose approach to U.S. military and domestic law.

Three U.S. colonels, all appointed by the Pentagon as judge and jury, were sent home while the Justice Department appeals.

On the human rights front, the project has been a constant focus of international outrage - from protests that the prison itself violates the spirit of the Geneva Conventions to allegations that prisoners have been tortured here.

Soldiers here have long portrayed the goal of the prison project as keeping the detainees fat, happy, healthy - and spilling their guts.

A recent media visit included a glimpse of an ongoing interrogation through closed circuit television of a detainee, shackled to the floor, scarfing down cream filled chocolate cakes, Devil Dogs, and chatting with an interrogator.

The image stands in stark contrast to FBI descriptions of harsh techniques now under investigation by Army Brig. Gen. John Furlow. In internal e-mails, 26 agents who worked here up to 18 months ago described sleep deprivation, detainees chained in the fetal position and left in their own feces and urine. One prisoner, an FBI agent wrote, had torn his hair from his head.

Yet soldiers here say the allegations present a distorted picture of a prison that has provided everything from angioplasty and plastic surgery to special Islamic meals to captives who arrived malnourished and wounded from the battlefield.

Detainees' advocates counter that many of the men were never combatants in the first place, simply foreigners swept up in a dragnet in the wrong place at the wrong time.

In reaction to the Supreme Court, Navy-run hearings are now reviewing the captives' individual claims, mostly relying on classified intelligence, and have so far released two of the 550 men held here. More releases could come soon.

An Air Force colonel chairing one review board said last week that his panel had found 14 men, among 82 prisoners he was assigned to review, who didn't meet the Pentagon's own standard for an enemy combatant.