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U.S. Activists Start Vigil Near Guantanamo Prison

Marc Frank

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HAVANA, Dec 11 (Reuters) - American Catholic peace activists arrived on Sunday at the perimeter of the U.S. Naval Base in Guantanamo, Cuba, to begin a three-day vigil and fast protesting conditions for terrorism suspects held there.

"We want permission to see the prisoners and justice for them," said spokesman Mike McGuire by telephone from the United States, from where he was tracking the activists' progress.

The protest coincides with growing international demands from politicians, human rights organizations, the Red Cross and others to see Guantanamo detainees and accusations they are being treated cruelly.

The United States insists the prisoners -- around 500 mainly from Afghanistan and Iraq -- are treated fairly but has refused recent requests by the Red Cross and others to interview them.

The group of 25 Roman Catholic activists, including a nun and a priest, defied U.S. travel restrictions to Cuba, arriving in eastern Santiago de Cuba earlier this week.

The protesters, from the "Witness Against Torture" organization, carried banners reading "torture no" and "close the U.S. naval base" as they marched some 50 miles (80 km) over four days to reach the small town of Glorieta, some four miles from the Guantanamo prison.

The Cuban military rarely if ever allows any civilians near the enclave it claims as its own and which has been held by the United States for over a century. Cuba has mined its side of the enclave.

"The Cubans were at first apprehensive about us, but after days of talking and marching they have decided to accept us and will escort us to the base entrance if we get permission to see the prisoners," McGuire said.

Witness Against Torture members and supporters have begun a call-in and e-mail campaign demanding the Bush administration grant them access to the prisoners.