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Guantanamo Prisoners Tied to London Bomb Probe

Jane Sutton
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GUANTANAMO BAY U.S. NAVAL BASE, Cuba, Jan 18 (Reuters) - Prisoners at the Guantanamo base in Cuba provided important information in connection with last summer's London transit bombings that the United States shared with authorities in the United Kingdom, the general in charge of the prison said.

The July 7 suicide bombings by four young British Islamists on three underground trains and a double-decker bus in central London during the morning rush hour killed 52 people and wounded more than 700 others.

"After the attacks in London, there were a number of questions asked trying to understand who these people were and where they had been," Army Maj. Gen. Jay Hood, who oversees the Guantanamo detention operation, said in an interview late on Wednesday.

"A significant number of the men we're holding here, a number, have lived in London, have lived in the United Kingdom," Hood said.

"And so where we could answer their questions and provide background on movements, travels, financing, communications, means of communications, recruitment, training, that sort of thing, I think we have played an important role."

British anti-terrorism officials have said it was unclear what support or international links the bombers had. But in a videotape aired in September, al Qaeda's second-in-command Ayman al-Zawahri claimed the group had carried out the bombings to strike at "British arrogance."

All of the UK citizens who had been held at Guantanamo have been released but non-citizens who lived in the United Kingdom are among the nearly 500 prisoners at the remote U.S. naval base.

Hood did not discuss which prisoners gave information potentially linked to the London bombings, nor did he provide specifics.

The general said U.S. intelligence agents had shared with U.S. allies "literally everything" learned from the prisoners.

"Of course if we had people here at Guantanamo Bay who had some specific knowledge -- locations, personalities, monies, communications during their time in the United Kingdom, we'd certainly provide that," Hood said.

The United States began sending prisoners to Guantanamo four years ago but Hood said some have only recently begun providing useful information.

He said "a good, significant number" of mid-level al Qaeda associates were captured during the war in Afghanistan and held at Guantanamo and had discussed men they knew or trained who may have since moved up in the hierarchy of the militant Islamist group.

"Who knows those people better than anyone else? The people that were training them, the people that were preparing them for future roles in that terrorist organization," Hood said.

He said the Guantanamo prisoners learned about the London bombings shortly after they occurred, probably from visiting lawyers who are challenging their detention in the U.S. courts.

"Most of the information available to detainees comes to them from their contacts with legal counsel," Hood said.