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US says Guantanamo hunger strike dwindling

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GUANTANAMO BAY U.S. NAVAL BASE, Cuba (Reuters) - The number of Guantanamo prisoners on a hunger strike to protest their detention has dropped to its lowest level since October, according to U.S. military officials, who said they are unsure why most of those involved have resumed eating.

As of Wednesday night, 22 prisoners had refused at least nine consecutive meals and 17 of those were being fed through tubes inserted through the nose into their stomachs, according to Army Lt. Col. Jeremy Martin, a spokesman at the prison for foreign terrorism suspects.

The hunger strike began in August and peaked on September 11, the fourth anniversary of the al Qaeda attacks on America, when 131 detainees -- more than a quarter of the total at the prison -- took part in protest of their detention at Guantanamo.

The number surge again on Christmas Day but has since dropped, military officials said.

"There has been a drastic change," Martin said. "Although we can't say with certainty why, detainees on hunger strike have begun to eat."

Lawyers for the prisoners have accused the military of undercounting the hunger strikers. In October, a federal judge in Washington ordered the government to notify their lawyers about forced feedings and provide them with prisoners' medical records.

U.S. District Judge Gladys Kessler said detainees' lawyers had presented "deeply troubling" allegations of U.S. personnel violently shoving feeding tubes as thick as a finger through the men's noses and into their stomachs without anesthesia or sedatives, with detainees vomiting blood as U.S. personnel mocked them.

Officials at the camp deny those allegations. The Navy doctor in charge of the detainee hospital said medical workers use soft, flexible feeding tubes and anesthetize and lubricate the prisoners' nostrils before inserting the tubes.

"It's done with great compassion and care," said the doctor, who like many military officials in direct contact with the prisoners, asked that his name not be used. "We are very, very gentle."

He said the prisoners were not strapped down during feedings and that none had been injured in the process.

Officials at the 4-year-old prison portrayed the hunger strike as a publicity stunt aimed at pressuring the United States to release the detainees. Most of the nearly 500 men were captured during the war to oust al Qaeda from Afghanistan after the September 11 attacks and the Bush administration has asserted the right to hold them indefinitely as part of the war against terrorism.

Guantanamo officials said most of the tube-fed prisoners cooperate with the "involuntary feedings" but refused to eat regular meals because they want to be counted as hunger strikers.

"Frankly I do not believe that the men that are participating in the hunger strike indeed wish to do any long-term physical damage to their own health," said Army Maj. Gen. Jay Hood, who

oversees the prison operation.

He said several tube-fed prisoners had told the doctors, "I know as long as you are here that I will not die."