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Democrats See 'Whitewash' of Guantanamo Problems

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WASHINGTON - U.S. lawmakers just back from visiting the Guantanamo prison compared it to a resort, but Democrats complained of a "whitewash" at a hearing on Wednesday because they were unable to hear from an attorney for detainees.

Officials of the U.S. naval base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, told the House of Representatives Armed Services Committee that well-fed detainees gained an average of six pounds, and described mostly benign interrogations based on establishing rapport.

But Democrats said Republicans blocked testimony at the hearing from an attorney for detainees, giving a skewed view of the prison at the U.S. naval base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, which holds about 520 foreign terrorism suspects.

"I think we should hear from people that are dealing with detainees there, not just from our side of the fence," said Rep. Ellen Tauscher, a California Democrat. "I don't think that just using a thin whitewash on this is going to fix it," she said after the hearing.

A number of committee members visited Guantanamo over the weekend as the Pentagon sought to deflect demands that the prison be closed or subjected to an independent review because of allegations of torture and abuse of detainees.

The lawmakers, Democrats and Republicans, said conditions there were better than they had expected.

"I think we've laid to rest any of what I consider to be very irresponsible allegations," Rep. Duncan Hunter, a California Republican who chairs the committee, said after a hearing with Brig. Gen. Jay Hood, the Guantanamo prison commander.

Rep. Madeleine Bordallo, a Democrat from Guam, said the prison camp was "more like a resort," and said she enjoyed dining on the same meals the detainees ate.

The United States has classified the detainees at Guantanamo, mostly from the war in Afghanistan, as "enemy combatants," and claimed the right to hold them indefinitely without charges as continuing threats in the war on terrorism.

Amnesty International has denounced the camp as a "gulag," and the prison has become a hated symbol for many Muslims.

INTERNATIONAL CREDIBILITY

While Democrats said conditions at Guantanamo were improved, they said the Bush administration must acknowledge past failures and establish rules for processing the detainees they said have been put in legal limbo.

"American values demand that our nation provide detention processes that will be fair and have credibility in the international community," Rep. Ike Skelton of Missouri, the committee's top Democrat, said.

Disputing accusations that prisoners' medical information had been improperly used against them in interrogations, Hood said there was "a permanent firewall" between the medical and intelligence staffs at Guantanamo.

Two medical ethics experts writing in the influential New England Journal of Medicine last week said their interviews and records from the facility showed that prisoners' health records could be used to find the most effective ways to extract information from them.

"We do not allow interrogators access to medical information in order to use it in any sort of coercive manner in support of interrogations," Hood said.

The Navy commander of the hospital at Guantanamo, Cary Ostergaard, said interaction with interrogators was limited to questions such as whether it was medically acceptable to give candy to particular detainees. He said there was a formal process for the Behavioral Science Consultation Team that oversees interrogations to pose medical questions.

But Ostergaard said because that team was outside his authority, he could not respond to the article's contention that psychologists were used in a strategy to employ extreme stress, such as exploiting a psychosis disclosed in a private medical briefing with a detainee, to get information.

Hood also said he could not respond specifically to the article because he had not read all of it. But he said an Army surgeon general's examination of policies for the proper role of psychologists in interrogations was "very satisfied with the policies we had in place."