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Algerian Officials Visit Guantanamo Inmates: Paper

Reuters
March 28, 2006

ALGIERS (Reuters) - A group of Algerian officials have travelled to Guantanamo Bay to inspect conditions for 26 Algerian prisoners, in a rare visit by an Arab government, el Watan daily reported on Tuesday.

The newspaper quoted one of the group as saying the detainees had complained of inhumane treatment during the visit.

"They denounced detention conditions and an inhumane (prison) regime," the newspaper quoted the team member as saying. The newspaper gave no further details. Algerian officials were not immediately available for comment.

About 490 foreign terrorism suspects are in Guantanamo. Some have been held for four years and only a handful have been charged with crimes.

El Watan said the Algerian team included representatives of the ministries of justice, foreign affairs and defense.

Among the Algerians at Guantanamo are individuals arrested in Bosnia, Georgia, Pakistan and Afghanistan, the daily said, adding the 26 had left Algeria between 1993 and 1999.

The newspaper said negotiations were under way between Algeria and the United States to repatriate them but added that it could take a while.

"The Algerian government will do everything to assist and bring all the necessary aid to its nationals," a member of the team who visited Guantanamo was quoted as saying.

U.S. relations with Algeria have been warming and the two countries began military-to-military exchanges last year.

Oil and gas-exporting Algeria, Africa's second largest country, is recovering from years of conflict between the authorities and Islamist armed groups.

An Islamist insurgency broke out after the authorities canceled legislative elections in 1992 that a now-banned Islamic party was poised to win. Authorities had feared an Iranian-style revolution.

An estimated 200,000 people were killed in the conflict, which has now largely wound down.

U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said during a visit to the country in February that he intended to deepen military ties with Algeria and cooperate more on counter-terrorism.

Washington describes Algeria as a force for moderation in the region amid concerns about Islamist extremism.