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ICRC Says Hunger Strike at Guantanamo Bay "Serious"

Stephanie Nebehay
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GENEVA - The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) said on Friday that prisoners were on hunger strike at the U.S. Guantanamo Bay prison camp and that the situation there was serious.

But spokeswoman Antonella Notari declined to comment on Thursday's statement by a defense lawyer that the action involved 200 of 500 prisoners and that 21 were being force-fed.

The humanitarian agency, which last visited the U.S. naval base in Cuba in late September, was in contact with U.S. authorities about the situation, ICRC chief spokeswoman Antonella Notari said.

"There is a hunger strike, the situation is serious, and we are following it with concern," Notari told Reuters.

"During our recent 10-day visit we were able to visit the infirmary, see the detainees and speak with them as well as the American authorities," she added.

The ICRC backs a 1975 Tokyo declaration by the World Medical Association stating that doctors should not participate in force-feeding, but keep prisoners informed of the sometimes irreversible consequences of their hunger strike, she added.

Amnesty International and human rights lawyer Clive Stafford Smith, a lawyer representing some 40 detainees, said on Thursday that U.S. authorities were keeping 21 alive by forcing food into their stomachs through tubes pushed up their noses.

SHACKLES

The prisoners are shackled to their beds 24 hours a day to stop them removing the tubes, he said.

"This is the 56th day of the hunger strike," said Stafford Smith before making a comparison with the Irish republican campaign of 1981, when 10 prisoners starved themselves to death in protest at British policy in Northern Ireland.

The United States opened the prison camp in January 2002. Many detainees were seized in Afghanistan. Only four have been charged and many have been held more than three years. Some former prisoners have said they were tortured.

Force-feeding is not banned under international law, but the World Medical Association declaration, endorsed by the American Medical Association, sets guidelines for doctors involved in hunger strikes and says they should not participate in force-feeding.