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Fasting at Guantanamo

Editorial
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HUNGER STRIKES among the 500 prisoners held by our military at Guantanamo Bay have become a recurrent though little-known problem in the effort to acquire information from those "unlawful combatants" and keep them out of action. As many as 200 detainees have refused food for shorter or longer periods in recent weeks to protest conditions, according to lawyers who now visit clients there with the backing of federal court orders.

Military officials have acknowledged participation by more than 100 fasting prisoners, with a score of them hospitalized for forced feeding by tubes and intravenously.

Hunger strikes by Guantanamo inmates are not a new phenomenon. They apparently happened in 2002 and 2003 also, but went unreported in the official secrecy that prevailed before federal courts insisted on allowing visits by lawyers. The imprisoned clients, from various countries, were mostly captured fighting for the Taliban or al Qaeda in Afghanistan.

Grievances of the hunger strikers, according to lawyers' accounts, include their prolonged confinement without trial, alleged beatings and other rough treatment, bad food and water and poor medical attention.

The news reports of fasting protests contrast with the previous blackout of information on the Guantanamo prisoners' experience. The Bush administration denies that they are entitled to protection of the Geneva Conventions, and while the International Red Cross is allowed to visit, it is pledged to secrecy in exchange for continued access.

The hunger strikes, if due to inhumane treatment and if not dealt with intelligently now that the news is out, could lead to another public relations disaster for our armed forces atop the damage resulting from the prisoner-abuse scandal in Iraq.

One lesson of Guantanamo is that there is no defensible way to keep these "enemies" in political limbo without any end -- or judicial determination -- of their cases in sight.