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## **Terror Suspect Won't Attend Cuba Hearing**

ALEXANDRA OLSON  
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SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico - A suspected senior al-Qaida operative who allegedly met with Osama bin Laden several times refused Wednesday to attend a hearing on his legal status in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

The prisoner, whose age the military did not know, was accused of helping run an al-Qaida guest house and fighting against U.S. forces in Afghanistan, said Navy Lt. Gary Ross, a spokesman for the Combatant Status Review Tribunals. He allegedly met with bin Laden, al-Qaida's chief, at least six times.

More than 45 percent of detainees have refused to attend their review tribunals, which are meant to determine whether the approximately 550 prisoners at the U.S. Naval base in Guantanamo should be freed or are properly held as enemy combatants, a classification that affords fewer legal protections than prisoners of war under the Geneva Conventions.

The military does not provide individual reasons for why the prisoners decide not to attend. The review tribunals have come under criticism from defense lawyers and human rights groups, in part because prisoners are not allowed attorneys present. Prisoners are also only given unclassified portions of the allegations against them.

One other prisoner declined to attend his hearing Wednesday, though he submitted a written statement, which was not released, Ross said. The prisoner, a 28-year-old, allegedly traveled to Afghanistan for weapons training and fought against U.S. forces.

Four other men accused of links to al-Qaida appeared at their hearings, Ross said. A 40-year-old, however, did not answer questions from panel members or speak during his hearing, Ross said.

Ross said the man was in Afghanistan when the U.S. bombing campaign began and was accused of "associating with forces engaged in hostilities against the United States." It was not clear if he ever engaged in combat.

The three others included a 29-year-old suspected of being "the right hand man" of Abu Zubaydah, an alleged al-Qaida leader, Ross said. Abu Zubaydah was captured in March 2002 in a raid in Pakistan.

The three made oral statements, but the government has not released transcripts of testimonies. No names or nationalities were released.

Only one Pakistani has been freed as a result of the tribunals, while 130 other prisoners have been ordered held as combatants. More than 230 cases are pending but nearly 200 have yet to be heard.