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Passive Resisters

Editorial
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The numbers are in dispute, but the fact remains: Dozens of men imprisoned at the U.S. base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, are starving themselves. At least 16 are in the infirmary, being tube-fed sustenance to prevent their deaths. It's an ugly reaction to an ugly fact: They are being mistreated by the United States.

After three-plus years in confinement, only four of the 504 prisoners have been charged with a crime; none knows what will happen next or when - if ever - he will be released. At least some have been brutalized by their captors. Many are invisible to the world, their names never released to the public or their families. Many apparently have lost faith in their fellow man, or at least Americans. As one told his lawyer last month, "Look, I'm dying a slow death in this place as it is. I don't have any hope of fair treatment, so what have I got to lose?"

They cannot be doing it merely for publicity - there are precious few prisoners who have any contact with the outside world, and even those few lawyers allowed to see specific prisoners must promise not to tell all they've heard and seen. There were other hunger strikes in 2002 and 2003, as well as earlier this year, unacknowledged by the military until news of them spread recently because repeated court rulings requiring that prisoners have access to outside counsel have pried open the prison windows a crack.

The summertime hunger strikers, tipped over the edge after seeing a fellow prisoner being abused, accepted sustenance after officers agreed to create a prisoners' grievance committee, according to lawyers for some of the prisoners. Days after forming the committee, authorities disbanded it. Now more are fasting.

The current wave - 36 men, according to the Pentagon; more than 210, according to lawyers who visited the prison last month and this week - seeks what past waves sought. Humane treatment. A trial. A chance to be heard. It's only fair.

Not only is imprisonment without charges illegal under U.S. and international law, it does not stop terrorism. In recent years, for example, such internment did not work for the British dealing with Irish Republican Army suspects. Resistance, and the bombings, continued. Al-Qaida and other terror groups are less centrally organized than the IRA; interning these men has not broken the "network."

Charging them, showing how a democratic system embodies justice and fair treatment, is the best argument against a world view that chaos is the only way to change one's situation. Barring that, for these prisoners, death does seem the only logical way to get out of the prison.