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Guantanamo Hunger Strikers Fed Via Tubes

As a Guantanamo hunger strike grinded on at the Pentagon's prison for terrorist suspects, details emerged through their defense lawyers.

CAROL ROSENBERG
The Miami Herald
October 19, 2005

A Washington, D.C., lawyer brought a treat last month for a Kuwaiti captive held at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba -- an \$11 extra-cheese vegetarian pizza from a takeout place on the Navy base. But Mohammed Daihani, 39, a father of six, ``refused to eat."

'He said that `The American justice system is like this pizza box,' " says attorney Thomas Wilner in a federal-court affidavit, quoting his client. ' `It looks very good on the outside, but is empty on the inside. It is nothing but air.' "

Since summer, detainees at the prison for terrorism suspects have been engaging in a rolling hunger strike whose details are mostly being made public by their attorneys.

Believed to be the longest such protest, it reached its height Sept. 11, according to Army Lt. Col. Jeremy Martin, when 131 of the 505 or so prisoners shunned meals. On Tuesday, the military reported that 24 prisoners were refusing food, of whom 22 were "receiving enteral nutrition," or having nutrition pumped directly into their stomachs.

Martin said by e-mail that no detainee has died at Guantanamo, where, he said, hunger strikers are not restrained during feedings via a tube tethered through a prisoner's nose and into his stomach.

Hunger strikers get "excellent medical care in a prudent and compassionate manner," Martin said, and are showering, exercising and walking around.

Wilner visited some of his clients last week and reported two were still being force-fed a formula through the nose. ``They look basically like skeletons, like people you see starving in the Sudan."

The military has mostly cast the hunger strike as a stunt that has not interfered with the work of the Pentagon's showcase prison camp.

Martin did not reply to questions of how the 20-bed prison hospital dealt with forced feedings that have exceeded 20 prisoners at a time. He also did not respond to a question of whether tubes are tethered through the noses of detainees for each feeding -- or left inserted in between.

But he said the military base adjusted its feeding regime to the holy Muslim fast holiday of Ramadan, the month when observant Muslims shun food during daylight hours.

Defense lawyers, who are mostly representing the detainees without charge, claim that their clients have become increasingly weak across a year of visits won through lawsuits filed in federal courts.

They attribute a range of complaints to the hunger strike -- from prisoners' grievances that guards disrespect Islam to reports of sexual humiliation in the interrogation booths to an overall sense of indignity in their captivity.

Captive Fawzi al Odah, 29, one of the first detainees to sue in federal court, told Wilner that he refused food after ``he had heard reports of U.S. congressmen coming back from Guantánamo and saying that the detainees were all being well-treated and eating very good food.

'He said that `I can no longer be part of this lie. If I eat, I condone the lie.' "

At the time, Wilner said, al Odah ``had a plastic tube protruding from his nose that was secured by tape."

Justice Department attorneys defend the force-feeding regime through documents in federal court, where civilian judges have so far sided with the Bush administration and declined to interfere.

Guards monitor their captives' eating habits and note when a detainee has refused nourishment for nine straight meals.

Commanders boast that they provide Islamic-approved meals to meet the captives' religious requirements.

Air Force Gen. Richard Myers, the former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said this summer that taxpayers spend \$2.5 million a year to feed the prisoners. That spending rate per prisoner, The Herald found, is five times what the government spends stateside to feed federal prisoners.

The New York-based Center for Constitutional Rights, which coordinates the captives' federal-court petitions, claims the Pentagon in June and July steered U.S. senators clear of "up to 200 prisoners" who ``were actively engaged in a hunger strike to protest their inhumane treatment."

"Information that claims up to 200 detainees are currently on a hunger strike, near death, or are being treated inhumanely," said Martin, ``is absolutely false, and totally misrepresents the outstanding work being performed by dedicated military and civilian personnel on behalf of the American people."