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Camp X-ray Hunger Strikers Are Shackled And Force-Fed

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HUNGER-strike prisoners in Guantanamo Bay are being shackled to their beds to stop them removing the tubes used to force-feed them, Amnesty International and a lawyer representing some of the detainees said yesterday.

A total of 21 detainees are reported to be being restrained 24 hours a day while they are force-fed through plastic tubes pushed up their nostrils and down into their stomachs.

Human rights groups are "deeply concerned" about the health of more than 200 prisoners - including seven UK residents - who they claim remain on hunger strike. They have called on Tony Blair, the Prime Minister, to intervene to prevent the loss of life.

Clive Stafford Smith, a lawyer who is representing 40 detainees including the UK residents, said: "Conditions there at the best of times are disturbing. But to imagine my clients being held in four point restraints with a tube forced down their noses, after all that they have been through, just makes me sick.

"All these prisoners are asking for is that the US military abide by the Geneva Conventions."

In Britain, prisoners have the right to refuse food, even if it results in death, as long as they are deemed mentally capable.

Mr Stafford Smith compared the hunger strike at the base in Cuba with that of the Irish republican campaign of 1981, when 10 prisoners starved themselves to death in protest at British policy in Northern Ireland.

"This is the 56th day of the hunger strike", he said. "We know from experience that the first person to die in those hunger strikes was after 46 days," he added.

He said that many prisoners have declined food since early August to protest at what they consider their inhumane conditions and indefinite confinement without legal rights.

Amnesty and Mr Stafford Smith claim that 210 prisoners - 40 per cent of the Guantanamo detainees - were refusing food. Mr Stafford Smith said there was no reason to believe that figure had fallen in the past two weeks.

Details of the protest are disputed by the US government.

Yesterday, a spokesman for the Pentagon told The Scotsman that the number of hunger strikers was now 27, down from 131 three weeks ago.

A spokesman at the detention centre confirmed that 22 of them were being force-fed at the prison hospital. All were being monitored closely and were in stable condition, said Lieutenant-Colonel Jeremy Martin.

Amnesty International and a pressure group, Reprieve, wrote to Mr Blair on Thursday, urging him to put pressure on the US government to meet the strikers' demands. They are also calling on him to seek a pledge to allow independent observers access to the strikers and report back.

"We just don't know what is happening, to whom and with what degree of consent," said Kate Allen, the director of Amnesty's UK division.

Only four detainees have been charged since 2002. Many have been held more than three years and some former prisoners have said they were tortured.

Amani Deghayes, the sister of one of the British detainees, Omar Deghayes, told a press conference that his decision to starve himself showed his desperation. "This is so unlike him because he loves life, he's very curious," she said. "To go on this long is not what I know of my brother."

The seven British residents represented by Mr Stafford Smith, most of whom have refugee status, are Mr Deghayes, Bisher al-Rawi, Jamil al-Banna, Jamal Abdullah, Shaker Aamer, Ahmed Errichidi and Binyam Mohammed.

The new allegations came less than 24 hours after the Republican-controlled US Senate voted to impose restrictions on how terrorism suspects can be treated - a rare rebuke to the US president, George Bush.