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U.S. frees 81 detainees in amnesty deal

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KABUL, Afghanistan -- The U.S. military released 81 Afghan prisoners Sunday in what Afghanistan's chief justice described as the first stage of a reconciliation program under which many suspected Taliban fighters held by the Americans might be freed over the coming months.

The Afghan government has promised former Taliban supporters amnesty if they renounce violence. President Hamid Karzai has said that he will seek to prosecute only the leadership of the movement--about 100 people.

The release of prisoners was arranged by a senior adviser for Karzai and by Fazel Hadi Shinwari, the chief justice who addressed the men in Kabul on Sunday before they were fed and sent home.

In Washington, a Pentagon spokesman said the U.S. military had nothing to add to the announcements made by the Afghan government.

Col. David Lamm, chief of staff for the U.S. military in Afghanistan, was quoted by Agence France-Presse as saying that some of the detainees were not seen as high-level threats to the 18,000 troops led by the U.S. military who are stationed in the country. Some had been arrested because they had been at the scene of attacks on American or Afghan troops, he said. After the Taliban failed in its effort to disrupt presidential elections in October in any major fashion, there have been signs that the U.S. military is preparing to scale down its offensive operations against these fighters in the southern and eastern parts of the country.

The Afghan government at the same time is clearly anxious to respond to the complaints of communities where U.S. forces have continued to raid houses and make arrests. Many families have complained that U.S. troops have detained innocent people on false information.

Most of the detainees interviewed Sunday on their release from detention at Bagram Air Base, near Kabul, denied any involvement with the Taliban and contended that they had been wrongly detained. Some had been held at Bagram for as long as two years.

Mistreatment alleged

Some complained of mistreatment at the hands of U.S. forces. Shah Alim, 19, from the eastern province of Kunar, said he was detained for six weeks at the U.S. base there, where another detainee died in custody in 2003.

"They tortured me there and poured cold water on me and prevented me from sleeping," he said. Treatment at Bagram was much better after he was sent there, he said.

Among the men released were two local officials, a former police chief and a district chief, and the brother of a militia commander who remains in

detention. Others said they were farmers and shopkeepers.

They arrived from Bagram for a ceremony at the Supreme Court building in central Kabul in a fleet of buses.

In his address to them, Shinwari called on them not to bear a grudge and to accept their fate as coming from God.

What had happened to them was the result of 30 years of war and upheaval in Afghanistan, and the aftermath of the Sept. 11 attacks in the United States, he said.

The chief justice said the government was working to win the release of all Afghan prisoners being held by the Americans in Afghanistan and in the U.S. detention center at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. He said discussions were under way with American officials.

"It is part of our reconciliation process," he said.

He said 400 men remain in detention in Afghanistan.

In Washington, Pentagon officials have acknowledged in recent weeks that three-quarters of the 550 or so prisoners in Guantanamo are no longer seen as having useful intelligence information and that they were no longer being interrogated. Some of those prisoners may be released in coming months, depending on what arrangements can be worked out with their home countries, the officials have said.

But the Pentagon has signaled that it expects to continue to hold a large number of prisoners indefinitely at Guantanamo, and is nearing a final decision on a proposal to spend at least \$25 million to construct a more permanent, long-term prison.

At least a few of those detained in Guantanamo are thought to be senior Taliban commanders and could be charged with crimes committed against their own people if they are returned to Afghanistan, said Patricia Gossman, author of several human rights reports on Afghanistan.

Risk seen in release

The strategy of releasing large numbers of prisoners may be risky as the country prepares for parliamentary elections this summer, which the Taliban leaders already have said they will try to disrupt. A handful of detainees released earlier from Guantanamo have rejoined the insurgency against government and U.S. forces.

Yet Afghan officials contend that fear of retribution and imprisonment has led many former members of the Taliban to continue their insurgency, and that if allowed to return home, they would give up the fight.

"If they stay away, they will always be against us," Zaher Qadir, commander of the Border Guards in eastern Afghanistan, said. "They need to come home and find something to do."