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U.S. holds 2 more Gitmo prison hearings

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SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico -- The U.S. prison camp in Guantanamo held two closed hearings Friday to determine whether terror suspects still pose a threat or hold valuable intelligence, raising concerns about the fairness of the proceedings amid new accounts of mistreatment.

One prisoner did not attend his hearing, said Navy Lt. Cmdr. Daryl Borgquist, a Pentagon spokesman.

The hearings began more than two months ago in an effort to determine if any prisoners should be freed from the U.S. outpost on the tip of Cuba. The military has acknowledged holding 18 hearings, with seven prisoners refusing to attend.

But no other information has been provided and journalists have been barred.

"The (media) policy is under review," Borgquist said.

The secrecy has drawn fresh criticism from rights organizations who say the review of the 545 detainees from more than 40 countries is neither just nor transparent. Many of the prisoners have been held for more than three years without being charged and without access to attorneys or the outside world.

"The situation with the hearings and the torture reflects very badly on the image of the United States and only serves to further the perception among Muslims in the world that somehow America is targeting Islam and targeting Muslims," said Ibrahim Hooper, a spokesman for the Washington-based Council on American-Islamic Relations.

The criticism comes amid growing allegations of mistreatment, including excerpts of a book obtained by The Associated Press and written by a former Army linguist who detailed how the U.S. military used women as part of tougher physical and psychological interrogation tactics.

Former Army Sgt. Erik R. Saar, 29, wrote in a draft manuscript that female interrogators used sexual touching and wore miniskirts and thong underwear in an effort to break Muslim prisoners and get them to talk.

There have also been allegations of other abuse, including using dogs to intimidate prisoners and gagging them with duct tape.

With only four prisoners facing formal charges and military trials on hold until U.S. courts rule on their validity, the review boards are one of the prisoners' few routes to freedom.

The hearings began shortly before the military concluded its Combatant Status Review Tribunals - aimed solely at determining whether the prisoners were "enemy combatants," a classification that has fewer protections than a "prisoners of war" status under the Geneva Conventions.

The tribunals have released only three men, and another 362 were ordered held. The other cases are still pending. The government refuses to release details on the decisions.

The AP has asked for transcripts of prisoners' testimonies under the Freedom of Information Act. No transcripts of the proceedings have been provided, although journalists were allowed to attend some of the review tribunals.

The media has been barred from the review boards.

"It raises the specter of secret trials," said Timothy Edgar, a legal counselor for the American Civil Liberties Union. "There doesn't seem to be any reason for denying, in all cases, media access to a tribunal which can affect an entire year of a person's life."

Prisoners have not been allowed to have attorneys present at either of the proceedings, and they are only told the unclassified allegations against them. The review boards will be conducted on a yearly basis, the military said.

All the detainees in Guantanamo are accused of supporting Afghanistan's ousted Taliban regime or the al-Qaida terrorist network, which protected Osama bin Laden.