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US says Taleban may be freed soon

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The commander of the US-led military coalition in Afghanistan says many suspected militants in US bases could be released in the new year.

The move would be part of efforts aimed at persuading Taleban members to abandon their insurgency.

The US is holding more than 500 people at its two main bases here, Bagram and Kandahar. That is a big rise on earlier in the year.

However the US has again ruled out an amnesty for the leader of the Taleban.

Criticism rejected

In an interview with the BBC, Lt Gen David Barno also said that fewer detainees were now being transferred to the controversial US base at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba.

He rejected criticism that the US has been slow to investigate cases where detainees have died in custody.

They are held as suspected militants, but without charge because the US has designated them "enemy combatants" - a status still not recognised under international law.

But Gen Barno said the numbers in detention was "probably going to come down", when a US and Afghan government amnesty offer to the Taleban gets underway in the New Year.

He wouldn't give definite figures, but said it would have an impact on the number of people in custody.

It will depend on the response to the amnesty though, details of which are still being finalised.

The key issue is who will be excluded. Top of the excluded list will be the fugitive Taleban leader, Mullah Mohammed Omar.

Attacks continue

Latest reports are that between 30 and 40 other senior figures will still be classified by the US and Afghan authorities as wanted terrorists.

"I think most [Taleban] the rank and file if they had the chance would put down their weapons and come back into the economic growth and political growth inside Afghanistan

Lt Gen Barno

In the past, President Hamid Karzai has talked of as many as 150 being excluded.

The idea is that the rest of the Taleban movement will no longer be targeted by US and Afghan forces if they hand in weapons and agree to abide by Afghanistan's new constitution.

However, although word of the amnesty has been around for over a month, attacks by suspected Taleban militants have continued.

Gen Barno admitted the hardline movement still has "a sting and a military capability".

But he said intelligence reports suggested the Taleban "leadership and many in their rank and file are debating internally how to deal with this new opportunity.

"I think most of the rank and file if they had the chance would put down their weapons and come back into the economic growth and political growth inside Afghanistan."

Many analysts here will see his admission that fewer people are being taken to its Guantanamo Bay prison camp as a sign of the US seeking to dampen the relentless criticism it has faced over the practice.

In private, some US officials here admit the Cuba base and the practice of interning detainees without charge has become an embarrassment.

But pressure is growing over further revelations of alleged abuse of prisoners here by US personnel.

The Pentagon recently admitted eight detainees have died in US custody in Afghanistan since 2002, two more than previously thought.

At least two of these deaths are believed to have been happened as a result of a practice known as "hanging and hitting" - according to a US Army investigation recently leaked to the Baltimore Sun newspaper in America.

Prisoners were shackled to the ceiling and then repeatedly hit or kicked, the report said.

'Abuses continue'

But Gen Barno denied accusations from groups like Human Rights Watch that the US has dragged its feet on investigating and prosecuting those involved.

"Of those eight cases, two of them have been resolved, three are currently under investigation and three of them have resulted in judicial proceedings against individuals who are now being charged."

Human Rights Watch says no one has yet paid any penalty for these deaths, with some cases going back to 2002. It also says abuses, including treatment widely regarded as torture, have continued.

The US commander said he could only speak for his time in Afghanistan and that he had seen "zero evidence that any of those practices have taken place" in his 15 months here.

Gen Barno is under pressure though to release an internal investigation he ordered in May into US detention procedures.

He promised parts of the report - carried out by one of his senior officers - would be made public by the end of the summer. But its release is being held up at the Pentagon.

Although they have sought to play down the issue, the number one priority for the US military in Afghanistan remains the capture of Osama Bin Laden.

In a BBC interview in January, the general said al-Qaeda's leader would have been brought to justice by the end of 2004, setting off a frenzy of speculation that his capture was imminent.

He would not say why he had made such a bold prediction. Nor would he say when US forces had last had any evidence of Bin Laden's whereabouts.

But he said the hunt went on, with "a very focused intelligence effort that operates 24 hours a day".