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Military, Lawyers at Odds Over Gitmo Hunger Strike

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The military and lawyers for detainees at the U.S. military base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, disagree on the number of participants in a camp protest because each side defines a hunger striker differently.

For the second time since July, some of the 505 detainees at the prison camp are refusing to eat or drink to protest their indefinite imprisonments, the U.S. military said.

Army Maj. Jeffrey Weir, a Guantanamo Bay public affairs officer, said Sunday that 91 detainees are participating in the protest. Of the hunger strikers, 21 are at the infirmary and are receiving nutrition through feeding tubes in their noses or mouths. The military defines a hunger striker as a detainee who has missed nine consecutive meals.

Kristine Huskey, a Washington lawyer who represents 11 Kuwaiti detainees, visited the prison last week and says that "90% of the camp is on strike in varying degrees." She says hunger strikers include detainees who miss a meal or two a day or refuse to take liquids.

Weir, however, says the numbers are steadily decreasing as detainees resume eating and drinking. "No one is anywhere near death," he says, despite some of the detainees' desire to commit what he calls "a slow form of suicide."

The camp's detainees are suspected al-Qaeda and Taliban operatives. Many detainees have been held for more than 3½ years and most were captured on remote battlefields in Afghanistan and Iraq in attacks on U.S. troops. Four have been charged with war crimes.

The Bush administration position is that it can hold the detainees classified as "enemy combatants" as long as the war on terrorism lasts, a stand that has been backed by federal courts.

Since January 2002, detainees have held several hunger strikes to protest the length of their detentions and treatment.

London attorney Clive Stafford Smith, who represents about 40 detainees, says 210 prisoners were on hunger strikes Aug. 15, when he last visited the camp. Stafford Smith says the detainees want to be charged or released. He says they also are protesting the quality of food and water, alleged beatings and the military's alleged mishandling of the Quran.

"The military wants to downplay this," he says. "The truth is, these guys are going to die."

Weir says the military will not allow detainees to starve themselves to death. "We are charged to take care of them and keep them in good shape, and that's what we're doing," he says. He also said no detainees are being mistreated and that the Quran, Islam's holy book, is not being mishandled.