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## **Guantanamo Hunger Strike Dwindles Amid Controversy**

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According to the U.S. military the number of hunger strikers among detainees at the Guantanamo detention facility has fallen to just four, from a high of 84 in late December. The military says three of the hunger strikers are being fed through tubes to keep them alive. Lawyers for the detainees call the tube feeding a form of abuse. They also say the dwindling number of strikers is not due to any progress on the demands for an end to their detention, nor any indication of how long they will be held. VOA's Al Pessin visited the Guantanamo facility, including the hospital where doctors care for the hunger strikers, and filed this report.

Toward the end of last year, military spokesmen said the detainees were alternating their involvement in the hunger strike in order to keep the number of participants high. Now, the doctor who runs the detainee hospital, a U.S. navy captain who asked that his name not be used, says only a core group remains on strike.

"The hunger strike began approximately August the eighth of 2005. The ones that we have remaining I would consider to be the more committed of the group," doctor says.

Since he made that comment in late January, the number of hunger strikers has fallen further, from about 15 to just four.

Officials say when the hunger strike threatens the health of a detainee, doctors feed him through a tube passed through his nose into his stomach. The hospital director says that resulted in resistance from some detainees at first, including assaults on the medical staff, but now he says most of the detainees are cooperative.

"In the past we've had a lot of resistance to giving them the required nutrition that they need," doctor says. "But we are now practicing more compassionate and consistent care over getting the required nutrition into them, and we have seen them respond very positively to that. So their health has improved and their weight has gained. They're becoming more like the population that you would see in the rest of the camp."

The doctor also says the medical staff is now using a less painful type of feeding tube, thinner and more flexible than the one used at first.

But American lawyers for the detainees say the resistance to the feeding tubes did not end because of any compassion by the medical staff. Rick Murphy represents a Yemeni detainee who recently ended his hunger strike. Murphy says his client, who he would not name, was extremely weak when he saw him last September and November. He adds the detainee stopped resisting the tube feeding only because he was being painfully force fed.

"He told us he accepted the feeding through the nasal gastric tube because the government threatened to restrain him, hold him down and shove the tube down his throat. And after three or four times of that, it was so painful, (that) under threat of that force he wouldn't fight them any more, but he wasn't cooperating," Mr. Murphy says.

Another detainee lawyer, David Remes, is even more graphic in his description of the tube feeding.

"Tube feeding is itself a form of torture. You have no conception of the brutality that is inflicted on these men. And anybody who tells you otherwise from within the camp, from the military, is lying," he says.

The lawyers also say the tube feeding is a violation of medical ethics. The American Medical Association says physicians should respect a person's decision not to take nourishment, as long as the person is capable of making that decision and understands the potential consequences.

The commander of the Joint Task Force that operates the detention center, Major General Jay Hood, says after four years of detention the detainees want some indication about their future. He says the military has a process to provide that, but beyond some media interest, the strike itself will not accomplish anything.

"We are not going to negotiate with anybody," general Hood says. "The men that we're holding here are being held in a very humane, safe, secure manner. Their questions with regard to their continued detention and their future are largely laid out by the Administrative Review Board process."

That process reviews the evidence against the detainees every year and allows them to speak on their own behalf. But much of the evidence is classified and no lawyers are allowed. The detainee lawyers say the process is illegitimate. Last year's reviews resulted in decisions to release or transfer to custody in their home country 127 detainees. Negotiations with the home countries are now going on to make the arrangements, but some detainees may not be able to leave Guantanamo anytime soon in spite of the review board's action.

There are currently 496 detainees from 44 countries at Guantanamo. They were taken into custody in Afghanistan and elsewhere for alleged involvement with terrorist organizations. A second round of reviews has just started.

For now, the Guantanamo hunger strike seems to be winding down. And the doctor who runs the detainee hospital says both those still on strike, and those who have begun to eat, are on the mend.

"Improving. They are healthy," doctor says. "We're very quick to respond if they show any indication of having, for example, an infection to which they would be more susceptible because of their level of malnourishment. But they're gaining weight now. Most of them are healthy. And so I think their condition currently is good."

The doctor says as the detainees go off the hunger strike, and their health improves, they are re-integrated into the general detainee population, where their degree of cooperation with guards and interrogators determines just what their living conditions will be. Meanwhile, their lawyers continue to work for access to U.S. courts in an effort to get what they consider a fair hearing for the detainees.