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Lawmaker Tours Become Part of Guantanamo Life Pentagon Responds to Critics With a PR Push

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GUANTANAMO BAY, Cuba -- As part of a major Pentagon public relations offensive, dozens of lawmakers are being flown to the maximum-security units here for VIP tours conducted by generals who portray the cells as safe and even comfortable places for suspected terrorists to spend their days.

The visits, organized by the military in a bid to blunt the impact of numerous reports of inhumane treatment and exotic interrogation techniques, have become such a routine part of life at this spartan, sprawling base that signs on the open doors of two maximum-security cells say "Tour Cell."

One aim of the PR offensive is to head off calls from lawmakers of both parties for an independent commission -- structured like the commission that investigated the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks -- to look into the conditions and activities at the Guantanamo Bay prison. The administration is also trying to fend off proposed Senate GOP legislation to ensure humane treatment of prisoners and to restrict interrogation tactics.

Republican and Democratic lawmakers say they are drawn to the prison out of curiosity and concern about the physical conditions and treatment of prisoners. House Government Reform Committee Chairman Thomas M. Davis III (R-Va.), who led a small delegation Monday, said close scrutiny is essential to improving the United States' image abroad and "winning the hearts and minds of the modern Arab world."

The lawmakers take the three-hour flight from Andrews Air Force Base aboard military aircraft that offer catered meals. The tours include visits to cells for both medium- and high-security detainees, a meal in the mess hall where troops are fed, and a classified briefing by the commanding general. The members of Congress are also invited to listen in on prisoner interrogations.

Fifty-one senators and House members have made the trek in the past three months, 32 of them in the past 30 days, according to the military. Guantanamo Bay officials said they do not have an estimate of the cost of the congressional inspections.

"More people go to Guantanamo than they do to most international resorts," quipped Rep. James P. Moran Jr. (D-Va.), who took part in the Monday trip. "It was a professional tour -- a well-conducted tour. But you would expect that, given the number of members of Congress and senators and reporters that tour Guantanamo."

A four-star officer -- Army Gen. Bantz J. Craddock, who as commander of the U.S. Southern Command is responsible for military operations in the Caribbean and in Central and South America -- cleared his calendar and flew down from Miami to show the lawmakers around for six hours.

As Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton (D-D.C.) stepped off a shuttle boat, Craddock reached out and carried her tote bag. Craddock said he thinks the tours will "dispel the notion that this is a dark secret down here."

"We want folks to see what we're doing," Craddock said. "There's a difference between perception and reality. The hype, the concern about this technique or that technique is over. It was done for a specific purpose, and it was effective."

After a mess-hall lunch, the group was ushered into a recreation yard that has a series of one-man cages with concrete floors and a chain-link roof. The concrete was emblazoned with a black arrow that pointed the way to Mecca for Muslim prayers. "Makkah 12793 KM," the notation said.

The congressional visitors were not given an opportunity to talk to any inmates.

"We don't want them to act up or yell, so we have to take certain precautions," said Army Maj. Jeffrey Weir. "You have to run a tight ship and make sure things go well. If certain areas have to be restricted, that's what we do."

A man in an orange jumpsuit could be seen standing a few cages away, as Davis kicked a soccer ball to Norton, who gently rolled it back.

The man in orange was one of the 510 detainees at Guantanamo Bay, where enemy combatants picked up on the battlefields in Afghanistan and Pakistan were brought to be housed for indefinite periods, without being formally charged. The lawmakers saw -- but did not speak with -- at most 10 inmates during their visit, including the prisoner who was being interrogated. That prisoner was bargaining to be returned to a lower-security camp, and the questioner was trying to extract some information in return.

The commander of the detention center, Army Brig. Gen. Jay Hook, posed for photos with the lawmakers. He said many of the negative impressions of the Caribbean island prison were influenced by disclosures of prisoner abuse at the Abu Ghraib military prison in Iraq.

"People need to know that this is a vastly different operation," Hook said. "I want all to know that the people that are here are adhering to laws and regulations consistent with what the American people would understand. And if they're not, we move them. We won't tolerate less."

Military investigations of abuse at Guantanamo have found a few instances of "inadvertent" mishandling of the Koran and isolated incidents of abusive measures being used in the interrogation of detainees. A recent probe of FBI allegations of abuse in interrogations concluded that a number of unusual techniques -- putting women's underwear on a detainee's head, leading a detainee around by a leash and the use of dogs for intimidation -- were used at the facility. But those techniques were authorized for at least one detainee of high intelligence value.

U.S. officials said earlier this week that they are negotiating to turn over nearly 70 percent of the detainees at Guantanamo to the custody of their home countries -- Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia and Yemen.

Military officials note that many Americans think of the now-defunct Camp X-Ray when they hear about Guantanamo Bay. The barren, kennel-like encampment that temporarily housed prisoners at the start of the war differs from the rest of the compound, which now includes a high-security facility modeled after an Indiana prison. Many congressional visitors never see the ghostly, rat-infested camp.

So many allegations about Guantanamo have emerged -- including assertions by FBI agents that they witnessed abuse -- that some lawmakers have said that they felt duped by earlier visits to the base.

Defense lawyers for the inmates contend that lawmakers are still getting a "Disneyfied" and incomplete view of a grim institution that has significant shortcomings, even if many of the most overt forms of abuse have been eliminated. George Brent Mickum IV, a Washington lawyer who

represents several Guantanamo inmates, said Congress has been sold a bill of goods about the typical menu in the camps.

"Lemon chicken and rice pilaf?" Mickum said. "That's baloney."

The tours appear to be having the intended effect. Some lawmakers who have made the trip one or more times have praised the conditions there in interviews with their hometown television stations and newspapers. Rep. Jon Porter (R-Nev.), part of Monday's tour, said of the inmates he had seen from a distance: "Many of them are happy to be there."

Thomas B. Wilner, a lawyer who has visited Guantanamo six times since the beginning of the year, said: "They're doing the tours for the same reason that Potemkin had his villages. The amazing thing to me is that these congressmen buy it."

Wilner represents 11 Kuwaitis who have been at Guantanamo for more than three years. He said several of them looked emaciated during recent visits. "It's a terrible place," Wilner said.

"Some of my guys are kept under bright lights 24 hours a day. Some of them haven't seen sunlight in eight months. They bring them out to exercise once a week in the middle of the night. They wake them up and take them from an inside cage to an outside cage, and they can't see anything."

More lawmakers, including Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Arlen Specter (R-Pa.), are scheduled to fly down this month.