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Long-Silent Detainees Talking

Lawmakers Told Even Outdated Information on Al Qaeda Helps

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The Army general in charge of the military prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, told lawmakers yesterday that interrogators there continue to obtain useful intelligence from detainees, even some who have been held for more than three years.

Brig. Gen. Jay W. Hood told the House Armed Services Committee that captives are providing intelligence about terrorist groups and operations and said that even outdated information is helping the military navigate the inner workings of al Qaeda and other terrorist groups.

Some detainees have begun talking in recent months, after years of silence, he said. "Every week, we learn something that assists in piecing together the strategic mosaic of international terrorism," Hood said.

"Information our detainees have provided has been instrumental in learning how terrorist organizations recruit, train, launder money and plan operations," he added.

Hood's testimony followed repeated criticism of the administration in recent weeks from human rights groups and lawmakers over allegations of abuse and religious desecration at the prison, with some suggesting it should be closed.

U.N. human rights experts have begun questioning former terrorist suspects released from U.S. detention facilities as they investigate prison conditions and allegations that some people are being held in secret locations, the Associated Press reported yesterday. Manfred Nowak, the United Nations' special expert on torture, said some undeclared holding areas could include U.S. ships in international waters.

Several members of the committee visited the Guantanamo Bay facility last weekend, and yesterday they almost unanimously spoke favorably about what they had seen.

Rep. Ellen Tauscher (D-Calif.) said she was impressed with improvements there but was concerned about media reports of possible cooperation between doctors and interrogators to exploit detainees based on their individual psychological weaknesses. Navy Cmdr. Cary Ostergaard, who runs the Guantanamo Bay hospital, said no such cooperation exists. Tauscher also praised Hood's descriptions of intelligence gathering.

"It's hard to believe that somebody that's been in captivity for three years actually knows something that is worthwhile about current operations that are going on around the world in the terrorist business, but they apparently do, and I believe you're doing a good job," she said.

Hood said there have been 28,000 interrogations and more than 10,000 U.S. soldiers have worked at the prison since it opened in early 2002 and there have been only 10 verified cases of inappropriate behavior. Some cases involved mishandling of the Koran, but several lawmakers noted that they witnessed the staunch protection of the detainees' religious activities.

The facility currently holds about 520 detainees.

Some lawmakers said it appeared as if the Guantanamo Bay detainees had better food, medical treatment and facilities than some domestic inmates. "No one wants to be in prison, but if you're going to be in prison, this sounds like the one to be in," said Rep. Joel Hefley (R-Colo.).