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Guantanamo Force-Feeding Tactics Are Called Torture

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Lawyers for a captive at the U.S. military prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, say their client was tortured to coerce him into abandoning a lengthy hunger strike, and they contend that tactics used to force-feed detainees explicitly violate a new federal law that bars cruel or degrading treatment of people in U.S. custody.

In a 13-page filing released yesterday, the lawyers say U.S. military officials at Guantanamo Bay used harsh and unnecessary tactics to break a hunger strike that at one point included more than 100 detainees. Invoking a new law principally written by Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), the lawyers said the military illegally made the force-feeding process painful and humiliating to coerce cooperation from the detainees.

The new procedures were instituted in early January. They include strapping detainees to a chair, forcing a tube down their throats, feeding them large quantities of liquid nutrients and water, and leaving them in the chair for as long as two hours to keep them from purging the food, according to detainee accounts and military officials. Detainees told their attorneys that the tactics, first reported last month in the New York Times, caused them to urinate and defecate on themselves and that the insertion and removal of the feeding tube was painful.

Mohammad Bawazir, a Yemeni detainee who was the subject of Friday's filing in U.S. District Court in Washington, told his lawyers he began his hunger strike in August and was determined to die in Cuba but stopped resisting the force-feeding last year when he decided it was futile. Bawazir's attorneys said he had been allowing the feedings -- through a tube that was left in at all times -- but the tactics changed dramatically on Jan. 11, when the military strapped Bawazir to a chair and forced a much larger tube into his nose and down his throat, causing him "unbearable pain."

Richard G. Murphy Jr., a Washington lawyer representing Bawazir, said yesterday that military officials "argue it's a life-saving mechanism, but they were already engaged in saving his life, without resistance."

The court filing asks for an injunction to stop the treatment, and Judge Gladys Kessler has scheduled a hearing for tomorrow.

A Justice Department spokesman declined to comment yesterday because the government has yet to file its response. Navy Lt. Cmdr. J.D. Gordon, a Pentagon spokesman, said Defense Department officials "believe that preservation of life through lawful, clinically appropriate means is a responsible and prudent measure for the safety and well-being of detainees."

Army Gen. Bantz J. Craddock, who leads the U.S. Southern Command, told reporters last week that the new techniques were designed to end the strike, but defended strapping detainees to the padded chair. He said detainees had devised a way to siphon the food out of their stomachs after they had returned to their cells, using the feeding tubes left inside them.

The legal filing is designed to test the Detainee Treatment Act, which made it illegal to abuse detainees in U.S. custody. Murphy said yesterday that the military clearly crossed the line when it changed Bawazir's treatment, just days after the law was passed.

