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Guantanamo Desperation Seen in Suicide Attempts

One Incident Was During Lawyer's Visit

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Washington Post
November 1, 2005

Jumah Dossari had to visit the restroom, so the detainee made a quick joke with his American lawyer before military police guards escorted him to a nearby cell with a toilet. The U.S. military prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, had taken quite a toll on Dossari over the past four years, but his attorney, who was there to discuss Dossari's federal court case, noted his good spirits and thought nothing of his bathroom break.

Minutes later, when Dossari did not return, Joshua Colangelo-Bryan knocked on the cell door, calling out his client's name. When he did not hear a response, Colangelo-Bryan stepped inside and saw a three-foot pool of blood on the floor. Numb, the lawyer looked up to see Dossari hanging unconscious from a noose tied to the ceiling, his eyes rolled back, his tongue and lips bulging, blood pouring from a gash in his right arm.

Dossari's suicide attempt two weeks ago is believed to be the first such event witnessed by an outsider at the prison, and one of several signs that lawyers and human rights advocates contend point to growing desperation among the more than 500 detainees there. Lawyers believe Dossari, who has been in solitary confinement for nearly two years, timed his suicide attempt so that someone other than his guards would witness it, a cry for help meant to reach beyond the base's walls.

Two dozen Guantanamo Bay detainees are currently being force-fed in response to a lengthy hunger strike, and the detainees' lawyers estimate there are dozens more who have not eaten since August. Military officials say there are 27 hunger strikers at Guantanamo Bay, all of whom are clinically stable, closely monitored by medical personnel and receiving proper nutrition.

The hunger strikers are protesting their lengthy confinements in the island prison, where some have been kept for nearly four years and most have never been charged with a crime. The most recent hunger strike came after detention officials allegedly failed to honor promises made during a previous hunger strike.

Military authorities do not publicly discuss individual detainees and declined to comment on Dossari. Lt. Col. Jeremy Martin, spokesman for Joint Task Force Guantanamo, said yesterday that there have been a total of 36 suicide attempts by 22 different detainees, including three in the past 20 months. Martin said all detainees are treated humanely and "any threat of injury or suicide" is taken seriously.

He added that rapid intervention in suicide attempts has prevented deaths. No detainee has died at the military prison, he said.

The protests come amid rising international concern about the treatment of detainees at Guantanamo Bay. Human rights organizations and the United Nations have complained about the lack of access to the detainees and voiced concern about allegations of physical and psychological abuse, including prolonged solitary confinement.

U.S. officials are trying to return many of the detainees to their home countries, but the process has been fraught with delays and diplomatic wrangling.

Three U.N. experts said yesterday that they would not accept a U.S. government invitation to tour Guantanamo unless they are granted private access to detainees, a concession the U.S. has not been willing to make, citing the ongoing war on terror and security concerns. Last week, the United States invited the U.N. representatives on torture and arbitrary detention to the facility, and the experts said yesterday that they hope to visit in early December. But they described their demand for access to the detainees as "non-negotiable."

"They said they have nothing to hide," Manfred Nowak, U.N. special rapporteur on torture, said yesterday at a news conference in New York. "If they have nothing to hide, why should we not be able to talk to detainees in private?"

Colangelo-Bryan said he fears that many detainees would rather die than be held indefinitely. He said he was shocked but not surprised by Dossari's Oct. 15 suicide attempt, given his "horrible ordeal."

He said he knows only that medical personnel apparently were able to revive Dossari, he had surgery and is in stable condition.

Detainees "see it as the only means they have of exercising control over their lives," Colangelo-Bryan said in publicly describing the incident for the first time. "Their only means of effective protest are to harm themselves, either by hunger strike or doing something like this."

Martin said claims that hunger strikers are near death are "absolutely false." He said the latest protest began on Aug. 8 and at one point had 131 participants but is now much smaller.

"This technique, hunger striking, is consistent with the al Qaeda training, and reflects the detainees' attempts to elicit media attention and bring pressure on the United States government," Martin said. The military also has long argued that terrorist groups have instructed fighters to invent claims of abuse if incarcerated.

Dossari has told Colangelo-Bryan that he has endured abuse and mistreatment on par with some of the worst offenses discovered at any U.S. detention facility over the past four years. In declassified notes recording the meetings, Dossari describes abuse and torture that stretches back to his arrest in Pakistan in December 2001, through the time he was turned over to U.S. forces in Kandahar, Afghanistan, and ultimately to his stay in Guantanamo Bay.

Dossari, 26, said U.S. troops have put out cigarettes on his skin, threatened to kill him and severely beat him. He told his lawyer that he saw U.S. Marines at Kandahar "using pages of the Koran to shine their boots," and was brutalized at Guantanamo Bay by Immediate Response Force guards who videotaped themselves attacking him.

The military says the IRF squads are sent into cells to quell disturbances.

Dossari told his lawyers that he had been wrapped in Israeli and U.S. flags during interrogations - a tactic recounted in FBI allegations of abuse at Guantanamo -- and said interrogators threatened to send him to countries where he would be tortured.

Dossari maintains that he is not connected to terrorism and does not hate the United States. A fellow detainee said that he saw Dossari at an al Qaeda training camp, his lawyer said.

Colangelo-Bryan is a private New York lawyer with the Center for Constitutional Rights, which represents some of the detainees. The group plans a "Fast for Justice" rally today in Washington to bring attention to the Guantanamo Bay hunger strike.

Colangelo-Bryan said Dossari has tried to commit suicide before. Prolonged solitary confinement has given him almost no contact with others and access to only a Koran and his legal papers.

"In March, he looked at me in the eye and said, 'How can I keep myself from going crazy?'"
Colangelo-Bryan said.