

MILITARY'S INFORMATION OPERATION AGAINST GITMO HUNGER STRIKE BREAKS DOWN

It has been clear from the start of the current hunger strike at Guantanamo that the military is carrying out its own information operation against a strike that it views as an information operation carried out by the prisoners. Back on March 17, Carol Rosenberg reported that commercial flights to Guantanamo will be terminated as of Friday of this week, and I asked whether the flights were terminated in order to quash coverage of the strike. Just a few days later, attorneys for Guantanamo prisoners made the same accusation to CNN:

"We are very concerned that the commercial flights have ended at a time when it's critical to have more regular contact with our clients (not less!) in light of the hunger strikes and their potentially perilous health conditions," Ranjana Natarajan, one of the lawyers representing Obaydullah, wrote to CNN.

Navy officials said lawyers and others who regularly take the commercial flights from Florida to the base may now take a once-a-week military flight from Andrews Air Force Base just outside of Washington.

But Anne Richardson, also with Hadsell Stormer Richardson & Renick, said the flights "are also capable of being canceled, at the last minute, without warning and at DOD's discretion."

David Remes, a Washington-based lawyer who represents 15 clients held at the detention facility, said authorities

"are canceling these flights because they want to keep the public in the dark about the mayhem in the prison."

"For the past several months, bad news has been streaming out of the camps," Remes said. "The authorities are taking one hit after another for the way they're running the camps, so they're doing what comes naturally – choking off the flow of information."

In that same March 17 report from Carol Rosenberg, we have this statement from Pentagon spokesman Todd Breasseale:

"That there is any concrete, mass hunger strike – that is an utter fabrication," Breasseale said. "Some who claim to be hunger striking are in fact eating handfuls of trail mix, nuts, and other food. They are taking in plenty of calories."

Reality is beginning to catch up with Breasseale and the military jailers at Guantanamo. As Rosenberg reported yesterday, the military now admits to 39 hunger strikers (making 23% of the 166 prisoners now held):

At Guantánamo, officials counted nearly a fourth of the captives, 39 of the 166 prisoners, as meeting the minimum U.S. military definition of a hunger striker for having lost enough body weight and skipped at least nine meals in a row. Eleven of the captives were being fed nutritional supplements by tubes snaked up their nose and into their stomach. Two were hospitalized for intravenous drips as well as the tube feedings.

But the military most likely still is lowballing the number of hunger strikers. The next three paragraphs from Rosenberg:

Lawyers for the detainees described a much more dire situation, with one of the best known cleared-for-release captives, Shaker Aamer, telling his attorney on Friday that about 130 of the 166 captives were taking part.

Aamer estimated he had lost 32 pounds, according to Stafford Smith, who quoted him as saying, "You can see the bones in my chest."

"Shaker understands that one detainee is reportedly 85 pounds, another 107 pounds and a third 117 pounds," said Clive Stafford Smith, who spoke via a monitored telephone line between the camps and Britain, where Stafford Smith is based.

That there is an ongoing battle over whose reports can be believed is quite clear from Jason Leopold's thorough article posted yesterday, where we learn that the military is following the same script it used during the last major hunger strike by Guantanamo prisoners:

Navy Capt. Robert Durand, the Guantanamo prison spokesman, told Truthout earlier this month that the hunger strike was "specifically designed" by the prisoners to "attract media attention."

It's a familiar line of defense, one that Durand, then a Navy commander, used dozens of times back in May 2006 concerning the last high-profile hunger strike at Guantanamo of about 100 prisoners.

"The hunger strikes are really an opportunity to take advantage of a window of maximum media attention ..."
Durand said during an interview with an Australian radio station, He rejected as false any suggestion that the hunger strike was a response to the abusive

treatment of prisoners or that they were being held indefinitely without charge or trial.

Omar Farah is an attorney with the New York City-based Center for Constitutional Rights and represents two prisoners participating in the hunger strike. To him, Durand's comments – then and now – underscore how little has changed at Guantanamo under President Obama's leadership.

"Like the Bush/Cheney administration, the Obama administration's reflex is to defend its detention practices at Guantanamo and to downplay the prisoners' protests by claiming that they are motivated by a shallow interest in media attention rather than a principled rejection of eleven years of indefinite detention without charge and abusive conditions of confinement," Farah told Truthout. "Common sense tells us otherwise. This hunger strike, like the many before it, was triggered by an arbitrary crackdown by the Guantanamo prison administration and is driven by the existential torment indefinite detention produces."

The military's position that they are completely innocent and being attacked unfairly by the prisoners is rapidly losing credibility due to continued documentation by the attorneys for the prisoners and by recent reactions by outside groups. Recall that last week, the ICRC showed up Guantanamo a week ahead of their scheduled visit because of concerns over the hunger strike. I speculated in this post and on Twitter on whether the ICRC could test the tap water that the military claims is safe but prisoners say is non-potable, but the ICRC reminded me on Twitter that they do not initiate investigations and do not publicly report on the conditions they find for detention of prisoners they visit (more on what ICRC does at Guantanamo can be

found here). I suppose it remains possible that ICRC could look at the water quality, but they would only convey their findings to the military as part of their report on detention conditions and not disclose those or any other findings.

Further erosion of the military's credibility is coming from the development of protests in Yemen, where relatives of Yemeni detainees marched yesterday at the US embassy. From AP, as carried in the Washington Post:

Activists and relatives of around 90 Yemeni detainees held in Guantanamo Bay protested outside the U.S. Embassy in Sanaa on Monday to demand the prisoners' release after more than a decade in detention.

Yemenis make up the largest contingent of the 166 detainees held at the U.S. naval base in Cuba. Most were detained in Afghanistan following the 2001 U.S. invasion.

/snip/

An embassy employee was seen accepting a letter from relatives of the detainees who protested on Monday. The embassy could not immediately be reached for comment.

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Yemen's government has requested its nationals in Guantanamo Bay prison be sent to Sanaa, and has suggested rehabilitating the detainees if they disavow militancy – a policy used with dozens of Saudis who were repatriated to their country.

Washington argues that Yemen, where al-Qaida is active, is too unstable to prevent former prisoners from engaging in militant activities.

Gosh, why would the military think the Yemeni

prisoners might want to take up arms against the US? It's not like they've been held under brutal conditions without being charged for over eleven years or anything. Wait...