

SHAKER AAMER: “GUARDS USING RAMADAN TO MASSAGE NUMBERS” ON GITMO HUNGER STRIKE

When this Charlie Savage story came out yesterday in the New York Times, my spidey senses went all tingly. Something just didn't feel right:

An American military spokesman said Sunday that 15 detainees at the military prison at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, who had been listed as having gone on hunger strike had quit participating in the protest, accelerating an apparent downward trend since the start of Ramadan last week.

The spokesman, Lt. Col. Samuel House, said in an e-mail that as of Sunday, 81 of the 166 prisoners were still listed as taking part in the hunger strike. That figure was down from 96 on Saturday, 102 on Friday, 104 on Thursday and 106 on Wednesday, the number at which participation in the protest had peaked and plateaued.

Even Savage seemed to realize that given the way head guard John Bogdan has manipulated the prisoners and especially the hunger strikers, there could perhaps be more to this story:

But David Remes, a defense lawyer who represents several Guantánamo detainees in habeas corpus proceedings, expressed skepticism in an e-mail and said he wanted to talk to his clients before drawing any conclusions about what the military was reporting.

"Perhaps the authorities finally made hunger striking such a horrendous experience that some men, at least, are dropping out," Mr. Remes said. "Perhaps some men feel the hunger strike has achieved its goals by forcing Guantánamo back onto the national agenda and jump-starting the transfer process. There are still other ways to read the numbers. Until we speak with our clients, we can only speculate."

It turns out that the skepticism is well-founded. From the Guardian:

But lawyer Clive Stafford Smith said his client Shaker Aamer had told him on Friday that guards were using Ramadan to massage the numbers.

"The military are cheating on the numbers as usual. Some detainees are taking a token amount of food as part of the traditional breaking of the fast at the end of each day in Ramadan, so that is now conveniently allowing them to be counted as not striking," Stafford Smith said.

Aamer – who has been held at Guantánamo for more than 11 years yet never charged – also claimed during a phone call with Stafford Smith that fellow inmates were being punished by being held in isolation during Ramadan if they refused to eat.

Isn't that interesting? We have flip sides of the same story. Savage informs us that the guards moved prisoners who are no longer participating in the hunger strike back into communal living areas where they can pray together, while Aamer's take on the same situation suggests that isolation is used a tool to punish those who still refuse to eat.

Considering the history of John Bogdan and the

emerging questions over his fitness to retain command of the guard detail at Guantanamo, it is not surprising that Ramadan practices would be used to game the numbers on the hunger strike while continuing to inflict punishment on those who continue the strike.

Remember, the US military has a strong reputation to uphold when it comes to an understanding of the effects of Ramadan fasting and its use as a propaganda tool.