

MILITARY CONTINUES EFFORTS TO HIDE TRUE SCOPE OF GUANTANAMO HUNGER STRIKE

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On Monday, I asked the question of whether the cancellation of regular commercial flights to Guantanamo was part of an effort by the military to cut off coverage of the hunger strike there. Yesterday, CNN obtained quotes from Guantanamo defense attorneys where they answer that question in the affirmative. The military also has grudgingly admitted that the strike is growing, but they still claim a much lower number of hunger strikers than the attorneys say are taking part in the strike. Head of Southern Command General John Kelly appears to be the chief military spokesperson spearheading the efforts to minimize the impact of the hunger strike. He has made multiple statements this week, appearing both in a press availability and in Congressional testimony.

From the CNN story, we have this regarding the military's actions in cancelling flights and the impact this has on dealing with the hunger strike:

Lawyers from the firm Hadsell Stormer Richardson & Renick told CNN they had DoD approval for a meeting with Obaydullah next week but were told that the scheduled flight has been canceled.

"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.”

Here is Carol Rosenberg reporting on the
military’s admission that the strike is growing:

Navy medical staff were treating two
captives suffering dehydration in the
prison camp hospital at Guantánamo as
the military disclosed Tuesday that the
number of hunger strikers had risen to
24.

The military said in a statement that
eight of the 166 war-on-terror captives
had missed enough meals and lost enough
body weight to be fed nutritional
supplements by tubes snaked up their
noses and into their stomachs. Guards

shackle detainees into restraint chairs to carry out the twice daily feedings.

Two detainees were at the hospital receiving electrolytes for dehydration, the statement said. It did not make clear whether those two men were considered part of the eight receiving Ensure nutritional supplements or among the 24 men defined Tuesday morning as “hunger strikers.”

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“We are fully in acknowledgement that this is a hunger strike that this has grown from 5 to 7 to 14 to now 21,” Army Lt. Col. Todd Breasseale, a Pentagon spokesman, said Monday.

The Guardian reports that Guantanamo attorneys believe the hunger strike is much larger:

On Wednesday, General John Kelly told a congressional committee that 24 Guantánamo prisoners were on “hunger strike light” and eating “a bit, but not a lot” as a way of protesting against allegations that the Qur’an had been mishandled by military staff, and also to highlight their continuing detention without trial.

But Omar Farah, who works on Guantánamo issues for the New York-based Center for Constitutional Rights, said that one of his seven clients at the base, Yemeni inmate Fahad Ghazy, had recently told him that the strike involved many more inmates. “They [the Pentagon] are not admitting the scale and scope of the hunger strike,” Farah said.

On March 14, Farah said, Ghazy had told him in a phone call that all but two inmates in Guantánamo’s Camp Six were on hunger strike, and that that likely

represented almost 130 people. Ghazy had added that some detainees at Camp Five were also on hunger strike. There are about 166 inmates at Guantánamo, of whom about half have been cleared for transfer or release. Nearly all inmates have been held without charge – some for as long as 11 years.

As part of his efforts to minimize the appearance of the hunger strike, General John Kelly spoke with the press on Wednesday. One bit of the transcript stands out to me as particularly chilling (emphasis added):

And we – we have observation into the communal area and into the cells, and we can see what they're up to and all. So – but, you know, on – on – generally speaking, we think about 24 of them are on say, hunger strike-like, where they're eating a bit, but not a lot. But they've declared that they're – they're not eating. And we can get into – into that if you want in a follow up.

But the – we believe – and there is a lot of interaction between the guard force and the detainees, and obviously we – they have a lot of interaction with medical personnel. Some – some of it's very routine, **some of it is not so routine.**

It's not entirely clear here whether Kelly is saying that prisoner interactions with the guard force or medical personnel (or both) at times is "not so routine". The possibility that Kelly may be referring to medical interactions immediately made me think of Jeff Kaye and Jason Leopold's reporting on the drugging of Guantanamo detainees as they arrived at the prison and Jeff Kaye's followup reporting on further drugging at times for their court appearances.

Another area where medical interactions could be not so routine could be in feeding of hunger strikers through feeding tubes. The Guardian article quotes Kelly on the feeding tubes:

“[They] present themselves daily, calmly, in a totally co-operative way, to be fed through a tube,” he said, adding that he believed those prisoners were also eating by themselves when they were in their cells.

Recall the bit above in Rosenberg’s article where she informs us that the prisoners are shackled to chairs while the feeding tubes are snaked into their stomachs through their noses. And this procedure has a history of damaging prisoners at Guantanamo:

Abdul Rahman Shalabi has been on hunger strike since August 2005. He has been force-fed twice a day by Guantanamo personnel, who insert a feeding tube through his nose in order to administer a liquid diet aimed at keeping him alive.

But independent doctors who have evaluated him say that the insertion of the tube has done permanent damage to his nose and throat, making inserting new feeding tubes difficult and stopping him from receiving the calories he needs.

His lawyers say that persisting with the current treatment could be doing more harm than good. Shalabi was hospitalised in March, and his weight has dropped to just 107 pounds, 30 per cent below his ideal body weight and at the threshold of major organ failure.

Shalabi’s lawyer, Jana Ramsey, is bringing a case aimed at forcing the government to allow medical specialists to work with Guantanamo personnel to prevent the further weight loss she says

is inevitable if his current treatment persists.

“While participating in the strike, Abdul Rahman has, among other things, been overfed to the point of vomiting, had tubes inserted and removed repeatedly until his nose bled, choked until he passed out and been blasted by pepper spray more times than he can remember,” she says.

That sounds to me like an interaction with medical personnel (and the guard force with pepper spray) that would qualify as “not so routine”.