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US eases up, yet Gitmo inmates say tensions rising

By MIKE MELIA – 7 hours ago

GUANTANAMO BAY NAVAL BASE, Cuba (AP) — As visiting journalists walked by, two of the inmates held up sketch pads on which they had scribbled "We need freedom." One of them shouted: "Is Obama communist or democrat?"

The protesters were Uighurs, Chinese Muslims swept up in the Bush administration's Afghanistan war, and their brief protest was indicative of the frustration building up in the Guantanamo Bay prison over the likelihood that freedom will take longer than they expected after Barack Obama became president and ordered the prison closed by January.

In Obama's less than five months in office, the U.S. military has opened communal spaces and started building a new classroom in the prison, and some cell blocks now have satellite television, DVDs and wireless headphones. But nearly half the detainees are still locked up alone for most of the day, and one of every eight prisoners is on hunger strike.

Shane Kadidal, who meets with detainees as an attorney with the New York-based Center for Constitutional Rights, said expectations for dramatic change have ebbed. He said prisoners know that only two prisoners have been released since Obama took office, compared with more than 500 under the administration of former President George W. Bush.

"They're saying, 'At least Bush sent some people home,'" he said.

Some inmates report an increase in hostilities as guards clash with inmates counting down the months to the January deadline.

"Oppression has increased," wrote Adnan Latif, a Yemeni detainee, in an April letter shortly before he slashed his wrist while meeting his attorney. "The best thing that I can hope for is death."

On Monday night a Yemeni detainee was found dead in his cell, an "apparent suicide," the military said.

Muhammad Ahmad Abdallah Salih, a 31-year-old Yemeni, had been held here since February 2002 and was the fifth apparent suicide in the prison. Like most Guantanamo inmates, he was never charged.

The U.S. is seeking foreign governments willing to take in some of Guantanamo's remaining 240 detainees. It plans to keep holding about 65 prisoners slated for prosecution and dozens of other al-Qaida and Taliban suspects who cannot be tried for lack of evidence or other reasons.

In February Obama sent Adm. Patrick M. Walsh, the Navy's second in command, to investigate. Walsh recommended ways of easing up on inmates who were confined alone in solid-wall cells.

The military has since introduced communal, twice-weekly "feast nights" with double portions in the maximum-security Camp 5, where it is also building another classroom, on top of the one opened during the Bush administration, to teach more inmates English, Arabic and Pashto as well as drawing.

Cable is being laid to provide satellite TV that already is available in the facility reserved for the best-behaved detainees. The five channels' programming offer sports and the Persian Gulf-based Al-Jazeera news station in English. The 17 Uighurs, who were ordered released by a federal U.S. judge last year, are held in a separate lockup with even more privileges.

Just over half the prisoners are now living communally, according to Navy Cmdr. Jeffrey Hayhurst, the deputy commander of the guard force. He said they include inmates in another maximum-security facility, Camp 6, that was modified to allow them to spend several hours a day together in areas with metal tables and chairs.

Camp 6 does not have live TV, but journalists taken on a tour of the prison on Sunday saw a flat-screen television showing a DVD about dinosaurs.

The planned changes had been in the works for as long as two years, but Walsh's report prompted the military to roll them out faster, Hayhurst said.

Navy Rear Adm. David Thomas, the commander of the joint military task force that runs the prison, said Obama's closure order did not affect prison life, because inmates had already heard both presidential candidates promising to close Guantanamo.

But the election was clearly a watershed for Guantanamo, a centerpiece of the Bush administration's post-9/11 war, where most of the remaining inmates have been held for years without trial.

A Kuwaiti prisoner, Faiz al-Kandari, told his attorney on a visit in April that troops in riot gear were being used more than ever to drag rule-breakers from their cells. He said he got that punishment three times over a 10-day period for violations such as refusing a recreation period.

The attorney, Air Force Maj. Barry Wingrad, said detainees may have been emboldened by Obama's election.

"They were starting to think like humans again," Wingrad said. "There wasn't the mechanical going-through-the-motions that there was in the day when they had no chance of getting a fair trial."

AP Associated Press



In this photo reviewed by the U.S. military and shot through a window, a detainee holds an apple while talking with other detainees, unseen, as he sits at a table set with a bottle of honey in a common area at the Camp Six detention facility on Guantanamo Bay U.S. Naval Base in Cuba, Sunday, May 31, 2009. (AP Photo/Brennan Linsley, Pool)

Map



