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U.S. sends Guantanamo detainees to Algeria, Cape Verde

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By Adam Entous

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - The United States said on Monday it had transferred two men held at its military prison at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba for nearly 8 years to Algeria and Cape Verde, and rights groups said the one sent home to Algeria was transferred against his will and could be abused there.

The transfers announced by the Pentagon of Abdul Aziz Naji to Algeria and Abd-al-Nisr Mohammed Khantumani to the island of Cape Verde in West Africa bring the number of remaining detainees at Guantanamo to 178, down from 245 when U.S. President Barack Obama took office last year.

Naji's case has been closely watched because he is the first detainee to be involuntarily repatriated by the Obama administration, according to Human Rights Watch. Other detainees who feared persecution at home were resettled in "safe" third countries, the group said.

Human Rights Watch said the Bush administration repatriated several detainees from Guantanamo against their will, some of whom were mistreated.

Naji, who has been held at Guantanamo since 2002, had told his lawyers that he did not want to return to Algeria under any circumstances because he feared persecution from the Algerian government and Islamist militants there.

The U.S. government had alleged that he belonged to the Lashkar-e-Taiba militant group in Pakistan, but the New York-based Centre for Constitutional Rights said he has "long been cleared of any connection with terrorism."

"We are deeply concerned that he will disappear into secret detention and face the threat of persecution by terrorist groups in Algeria," said the centre, which has represented many Guantanamo detainees.

"He bears no ill will towards the Algerian government, but fears that it will be unable to protect him from extremists in Algeria," it added in a statement.

In court filings, the U.S. government countered that Algeria's human rights record has improved significantly over the past decade and that the government had promised to treat returned detainees humanely, according to Human Rights Watch.

COORDINATED WITH ALGERIA

In a statement, the Pentagon said the transfer was coordinated with the government of Algeria to ensure it took place under "appropriate security measures."

Khantumani, a Syrian who was resettled in Cape Verde, had been detained in Guantanamo along with his father since 2002, according to the Centre for

Constitutional Rights.

Rights groups had argued that it was too dangerous to send Khantumani, who was only 17 when he was taken into U.S. custody, back to Syria.

Obama has vowed to close the detention centre at Guantanamo, which opened in January 2002 to hold and interrogate foreigners captured after U.S.-led forces invaded Afghanistan to oust al Qaeda and its Taliban protectors.

Many detainees were captured outside Afghanistan as part of former U.S. President George W. Bush's war on terrorism launched in response to the September 11, 2001, attacks that killed nearly 3,000 people in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania.

Some 780 prisoners have been held there in all.

Obama has missed his self-imposed January 2010 deadline for shutting down the camp, partly because Congress blocked funding for a plan to move captives to a prison in the United States.

The U.S. government has also had difficulty persuading its allies to take in some of the detainees.

Before Naji's involuntary return, 10 Algerians had agreed to go back, Human Rights Watch said.

State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley, speaking of the 10 repatriated to Algeria, said, "None, in our view, has appeared to be mistreated."

Andrea Prasow, Human Rights Watch's senior counterterrorism counsel, said: "The U.S. needs to consider the individual circumstances of each detainee before repatriation.

"Someone who would rather remain at Guantanamo than go home should at least be given the chance to explain why in a proper legal setting."

(Additional reporting by Tabassum Zakaria; editing by Mohammad Zargham)

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