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Fewer hunger strikers at Guantanamo Bay: US

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By Will Dunham

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - The number of Guantanamo Bay prisoners taking part in an ongoing hunger strike has fallen by more than half after a surge in participation that began on Christmas Day, the U.S. military said on Friday.

The military last week said participation in the protest by detainees, believed to be uniformly Muslim, had more than doubled starting on the Christian holiday on December 25, with 46 joining in, bringing the total to 84 by last Thursday.

But 44 of those had since ended their participation, Army Lt. Col. Jeremy Martin, a military spokesman, said by telephone from the U.S. naval base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, site of the U.S. prison for foreign terrorism suspects.

The Pentagon said the prison housed about 500 detainees, many of whom have been held for nearly four years, all but nine without charges. The hunger strike has been going on since August 8, with fluctuating levels of participation, Martin said.

Lawyers for detainees call the strike a protest of jail conditions and the prisoners' lack of legal rights. The military says it treats the detainees humanely, and says the strike is intended to "elicit media attention and bring pressure on the United States government to release them."

Martin said 32 of the current 40 hunger strikers were being fed through tubes inserted through the nose into the stomach.

He declined to speculate on why so many had stopped taking part in the hunger strike.

Martin said peak participation was on September 11, the fourth anniversary of the al Qaeda attacks on America, when 131 detainees took part in the protest. Human rights lawyers, however, estimate at least 200 were involved at the peak.

Military officials define a hunger striker as a detainee who has refused nine straight meals, and often refer to the strike as a "voluntary fast" and force-feeding as "enteral feeding."

Detainees' lawyers say the strike began in early August after the men accused the military of reneging on promises to bring the prison into compliance with the Geneva Conventions. Detainees are willing to starve themselves to death to demand humane treatment and a fair hearing on whether they must stay, the lawyers said.

Bill Goodman, legal director for the New York-based Center for Constitutional Rights, which represents many detainees, said restrictions on information from the base made it impossible to know just how many detainees were taking part.

"You can't believe them because they have an interest in trying to purvey this perspective that everything at Guantanamo is fine and everybody is wonderful. In order to do that, they have to say there aren't that many hunger strikers," he said.

Detainees' lawyers have accused the military of violently shoving tubes through the men's noses and into their stomachs without anesthesia or sedatives as part of the force-feeding process and then hurling religious taunts at them when they vomit up blood. The military has denied allegations of deliberately inflicting suffering in the feeding process.

Most Guantanamo detainees were captured in Afghanistan after U.S. forces invaded to overthrow the Taliban, which was harboring al Qaeda leaders.

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