

Gitmo inmates to get phone calls to family

GUANTANAMO BAY NAVAL BASE, Cuba (AP) — The U.S. military said yesterday that it will allow detainees to make regular phone calls to their families from Guantanamo Bay prison, where many have been confined in extreme isolation for as long as six years.

The new policy by the Defense Department, which previously said security concerns prevented such calls, is part of a strategy to ease conditions for frustrated prisoners at the U.S. Navy base in southeastern Cuba.

A Pentagon spokesman, Navy Cmdr. Jeffrey Gordon, said the telephone policy reflects a commitment to maintaining the health and well-being of Guantanamo detainees. No start date has been set for the program.

Inmates' contact with the outside world generally has been limited to mail delivered by the International Committee of the Red Cross and meetings with their lawyers. The military has allowed a small number of detainees to speak with their families but typically only on "humanitarian" grounds such as after a death in the family.

Detainees' attorneys welcomed the phone calls but said reconnecting with family could make life more painful for those at Guantanamo, where the U.S. military holds about 275 men on suspicion of links to terrorism, al Qaeda or the Taliban.

Marc Falkoff, a Northern Illinois University law assistant professor who represents 17 detainees, said one of his Yemeni clients has a 6-year-old daughter with whom he has never spoken.

"To be honest, I don't know whether speaking with her will lift him from his depression or simply shatter him," said Mr. Falkoff, who added that the man has grown so hopeless that he has asked his lawyers to stop meeting with him.

A spokesman for the detention center, Army Lt. Col. Ed Bush, said it is working out procedures for the calls. He declined to provide details about which detainees would be eligible and how often calls would be permitted.

"I have no projected timeline for implementation, but it is currently being developed," he said.

Chicago lawyer H. Candace Gorman, who represents a Guantanamo detainee, said she learned on a recent visit with her client that prisoners will be allowed to speak with their families for one hour every six months.

Some attorneys are skeptical that the calls will ever happen.

"I will believe it when I see it," said Wells Dixon, a lawyer with the New York-based Center for Constitutional Rights, which represents many Guantanamo detainees.

In an attempt to reduce hostility inside the detention center, military commanders have pursued plans for humanities courses and more open communal areas for men held in isolation 22 hours a day. Attorneys for detainees say any assaults against guards are partly triggered by frustration among men with no real chance to confront accusations that they are enemy combatants.

