

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: AMR 51/154/2005 (Public)
News Service No: 257
23 September 2005

USA: Guantánamo hunger strikers critically ill

Several detainees on hunger strike at Guantánamo Bay are critically ill, according to lawyers who have recently visited the detention camp. Amnesty International is also concerned at reports that the camp's facilities are unable to cope with the medical crisis.

"The US military appears to be systematically downplaying the hunger strike in order to avoid international criticism," said Susan Lee, Americas Director at Amnesty International. "In July they denied the existence of a hunger strike two weeks after it had started. Now they seem to be understating the number of detainees involved and the gravity of the medical condition of several of the detainees. This policy once again demonstrates the lack of transparency around all US detention practices and policies in the 'war on terror'".

As many as 210 people are said to be taking part in the current hunger strike in Guantánamo Bay, although the US Department of Defense has put the figure as low as 36. Detainees' lawyers put this low figure down to the criteria used to determine who is technically on hunger strike. The US military defines a hunger strike as the refusal of nine consecutive meals within a 72 hour period. Reports from lawyers suggest that detainees are accepting one meal in this timeframe, but then flushing the meal down the toilet to avoid being force-fed through nasal gastric tubes.

"We are particularly concerned about the health of detainees who may have escaped this narrow definition of a hunger-striker. They may not be receiving any medical treatment," said Susan Lee. "We urge that independent medical experts be given access to detainees."

New details are emerging of the earlier hunger strike in Guantánamo, which took place over the summer. Lawyers report that a number of detainees collapsed in their cells and vomited blood.

"Faced with a worsening situation of its own making, the US government should close Guantánamo Bay and either charge and try the detainees in line with international law, or release them," said Susan Lee.

One of the key points that detainees say drove them to hunger strike was the lack of access to a court to challenge their detention. They said beatings and other ill-treatment were another reason. Amnesty International has long campaigned for access to courts for Guantanamo detainees, as well as an end to torture and ill-treatment.

In a worrying development, lawyers working with the Center for Constitutional Rights who are

representing a number of the hunger strikers say they are being denied access to the detention camp hospital. Their clients are taken from their sick beds, some so weak they cannot sit up, and moved to cells for interviews with their lawyers.

"Not only should the US administration release full details of this hunger strike and keep detainees' families informed on their health, it should open up Guantánamo and all other 'war on terror' detention facilities to independent scrutiny," said Susan Lee.

Background

An unknown number of detainees resumed an earlier hunger strike around 12 August because camp authorities had not kept promises that conditions in the camp would be improved, according to reports.

During the first hunger strike, which took place over the summer, Navy Lt. Cmdr. Flex Plexico denied any knowledge of it despite consistent reports from lawyers.

Amnesty International believes the conditions in Guantánamo Bay amount to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. The organisation is campaigning to stop torture and ill-treatment in the "war on terror". For more information, please go to the campaign home page:

<http://web.amnesty.org/pages/stoptorture-index-eng>

Public Document

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

For latest human rights news view <http://news.amnesty.org>