

# USA: Guantanamo Hunger Strikers Choose Death Over Inhumane Conditions

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**Facing a massive hunger strike by desperate prisoners at the U.S. military base in Guantanamo, Cuba, President Obama has acknowledged that the prison should be shut down. He has said that before over four years ago when he was running for his first term, but did nothing after he was elected.**

In recent years the plight of the prisoners at Guantanamo has receded in public consciousness in the U.S. The hunger strike, which began in February, has begun to change that.

In the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, the Bush administration with bipartisan support launched the wars against Afghanistan and then Iraq. Prisoners taken in those wars were declared to be “enemy combatants,” not prisoners of war, and not covered by international conventions of how such prisoners must be treated.

As “enemy combatants” they had no rights at all. They were held without charges indefinitely, subject to brutal torture, sexually humiliated and raped, and some were murdered. These activities were carried out in “black sites” in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as at Guantanamo.

Another indignity they were subjected to was humiliation of their Muslim religious beliefs. Korans were desecrated. It was another such incident in February which was the spark that ignited the hunger strike against the prisoners’ intolerable conditions.

The Bush administration chose the U.S. military base at Guantanamo under the theory that it wasn’t part of the U.S. but of Cuba. Thus U.S. laws didn’t apply to people imprisoned there, and they could be mistreated at will. The base isn’t under Cuban law either, since the U.S. occupies the base and maintains it by military force.

In the first inter-imperialist war, between Spain and the United States in 1898, the U.S. conquered Cuba and other colonies from Spain. The U.S. granted Cuba a fake “independence” a few years later but kept real control that included sending in the Marines when necessary, and retaining Guantanamo as a U.S. Naval base in the Caribbean Sea, ostensibly “renting” it from Cuba. But when the Cuban Revolution of 1959 declared independence from U.S. imperialism and denounced the farce, this legal fiction was maintained by force.

Washington claims that the worse aspects of the mistreatment of prisoners at the base have been stopped, and that may be true. But the main issue, that people are being held without charges or trials indefinitely, has continued now for over a decade. It is this situation of utter despair that erupted in the current hunger strike.

One of the hunger strikers, a Yemeni man named Samir Naji al Hasan Moqbel, wrote a letter that somehow was smuggled out, and which appeared in the New York Times. In it he said, “The situation is desperate now. All of the detainees here are suffering deeply....

"And there is no end in sight to our imprisonment. Denying ourselves food and risking death every day is the choice we have made. I just hope that because of the pain we are suffering, the eyes of the world will once again look to Guantanamo before it is too late."

Mogbel has been held at the prison for 11 years without charge.

Over the years, of the hundreds held at the base, many have been released because there was no evidence against them. However, 166 remain. Of these, 86 have been found to be "not guilty" by the U.S. armed forces themselves, but are being held indefinitely anyway.

According to independent investigations, and a recent one by a commission set up by the government itself, the torture and indefinite imprisonment of "enemy combatants" has not yielded even one instance of information about any attack against the U.S.

At first, the Obama administration sought to play down the hunger strike, saying it was just a few. Then there was an attack on the strikers by the military, to round them up and put them into solitary confinement in the hope of forcing them to eat. This has failed.

Lawyers for the prisoners, who are granted only limited access to them, report that at least 130 are participating in the hunger strike. The government has reluctantly admitted that the number is over 100.

Besides isolating the strikers, the military has begun force-feeding some, through tubes shoved up their noses and down into their stomachs. This is being done with tubes of large diameter, to inflict pain in hopes of breaking the will of the strikers.

Carlos Warner, a lawyer for some of the prisoners, was interviewed on the "Democracy Now!" show on April 29. He spoke about one prisoner, Fayiz al-Kandry, whom he talked to by telephone on April 26:

"This is the third conversation I've had with him since the strike began. I visited him in person twice, and then I got the phone call. And things have gone downhill.... he told me that they're force-feeding him with what's called a size 10 tube, a bigger tube than what is required. He said that this makes it difficult for him to breathe, and it induces vomiting. And he asked them to give him a smaller tube, and the military refuses to do so. Why they would not do these things, we have no idea."

Warner broke down as he read a letter from Fayez to him. The letter contained a photo of a homemade lantern. "I made this lantern with my brothers. It's made with bits of paper and cardboard. We painted it with bits of paint and fruit juice. We used a water bottle sanded on the floor as glass. It's held together by pressure only.

"We made this lantern for those in the world who remember and pray for us during this time of suffering. Let its light fill you.

"Use it to bring peace to your heart.

"Thank you, Fayiz."

Warner added, "And when he wrote that, I mean, I felt that was a goodbye letter."

In his news conference where Obama once again called for the closing of Guantanamo, he said that prisoners were being force-fed for "humane" reasons. Given Washington's inhumane treatment of the "enemy combatants" for over a decade, this assertion is laughable.

The real reason for the force-feeding is to try to avoid the international embarrassment of the hunger strikers beginning to die. Force-feeding them against their will to carry their protest to the death is one more denial of the prisoners' elementary human rights.

In the wake of the bombing of the Boston Marathon, there has been an upsurge of Islamophobia. While nakedly vicious among Republicans, Democrats have echoed it too, even if less openly appealing to prejudice. This is the background against which the Guantanamo events are unfolding.

In the past, Obama has cited Republican opposition to the closing of Guantanamo as his excuse for not doing so. This cynical dance between the Democrats and Republicans is playing out across the board, from the disputes about the federal budget to immigration etc. etc. to Guantanamo.

It is also a bald faced lie. As Commander in Chief of all the armed forces, Obama could bring charges against the prisoners and give them trials, release those he can't charge because there is no evidence against them (aside from possible "confessions" obtained by torture), and release the 86 who have already been found "not guilty." He could instruct his Attorney General to try them in American courts under U.S. law, and not in the kangaroo military tribunals that only a handful are being slowly tried in.

Obama is Mr. Commander in Chief when killing defenseless "enemy combatants" by drones, but feigns Mr. Wimp when faced with a Republican critic.

**Barry Sheppard**

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