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U.S. activists organize 'rolling fast' on behalf of Guantanamo hunger strikers

Claire Schaeffer-Duffy | Apr. 1, 2013 NCR Today

As the prisoner hunger strike at Guantanamo Bay enters its 54th day, U.S. activists are organizing a ?rolling fast? on behalf of the detainees.

After initially denying the protest at the detention facility, the U.S. military now says 37 prisoners are on a hunger strike. Of these, 11 are being force-fed and three have been hospitalized. Lawyers for the detainees continue to insist, based on prison visits and conversations with their clients, that the number is more than 100.

The intrusive searches of prisoners? cells by guards reportedly triggered this latest nonviolent protest, but the primary reason for the prisoners? action is despair and frustration over their indefinite and unjust detention.

More than half (86) of the 166 men at Guantanamo were cleared for release by an interagency government more than two years ago. Congressional restrictions have prohibited their repatriation or transfer to a host country. Those not initially cleared were promised review four years ago, but none have occurred so far.

Speaking before the House Armed Services Committee last week, U.S. Gen. John Kelly, head of the U.S. Southern Command, said the detainees once had ?great optimism? the Obama administration would close Guantanamo. They were ?devastated? when the president backed off.

?[Obama] said nothing about it in his inauguration speech ... nothing about it in his State of the Union speech,? Kelly said.

During Holy Week, more than 100 U.S. activists participated in a seven-day ?solidarity fast? with the hunger strikers organized by Witness Against Torture [1], a grassroots group that has been campaigning for the closure of Guantanamo since 2005. Activists say the dire situation in Guantanamo has prompted them to continue fasting.

?While the 7 day fast is ending -- after generating powerful vigils and visuals, over 500 letters to the prisoners, hundreds of phone calls, many press interviews, and a growth in numbers and commitment within our community -- we feel compelled to continue a form of fasting in solidarity with those on hunger strike,? wrote organizer Matt Daloisio in an email to participants in the Holy Week fast.

Daloisio said the group is coordinating a ?rolling fast? for the duration of the hunger strike, with individuals signing up for a 24-hour period. In addition to abstaining from food, fasters are asked to make three phone calls and write one letter on behalf of the Guantanamo detainees.

Comments from my previous post [2] on the Guantanamo hunger strikers indicate some readers are confused about the legal status of these men and assume that because they have been imprisoned, they are guilty or dangerous and merit what has become for many of them a de facto death sentence. An op-ed [3] in last week?s *The Washington Post* by Thomas Wilner, an attorney who successfully argued two Supreme Court cases that

established the detainees? right to *habeas corpus,* addresses this misconception.

?The American people have been led to believe that the detainees are all too dangerous to release or transfer, and that we must keep them at Guantanamo to protect our security,? Wilner writes. ?That line may play well politically, but it is simply not true, and it is costing us dearly.?

Wilner says of the 166 men held at Guantanamo, ?[f]ewer than 20 are ?high-value detainees,? men who were transferred to Guantanamo from other locations several years ago and are scheduled to stand trial for war crimes. The others were, at most, low-level functionaries or people swept up and sold for bounties in the confusing initial stages of the fog of war in Afghanistan. Many simply were in the wrong place at the wrong time.?

Wilner goes on to note that even beyond the ?terrible injustice? to the imprisoned, the U.S. is paying ?a very high financial price? for the prison.

He continues:

> Guantanamo is our nation?s most expensive prison, with an annual operating budget of almost $177 million, more than a million dollars per year for each detainee, and almost $90 million a year just for the 86 prisoners who were cleared for release three-plus years ago. The nearly $300 million spent jailing the latter group the past three years and the annual cost of keeping Guantanamo open amount to a lot of money that could be used to save jobs and services being cut as a result of the so-called sequester. And the costs of keeping Guantanamo open probably will increase. The military has said its Cuban base is in dire need of upgrades and has requested nearly $200 million for capital improvements [4] to keep Guantanamo functioning as a prison. Where is the congressional concern with those costs?
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> But the cost to our nation is more than economic. Many who have been charged with protecting our national security, including former defense secretary Robert Gates, former national security adviser Dennis Blair, former CIA director David Petraeus and former secretary of state Colin Powell, have pointed out that Guantanamo actually hurts U.S. security. As Sen. John McCain emphasized during his bid for the White House, when he ?strongly? favored closing Guantanamo, the prison is a negative symbol that serves as an important recruiting tool for terrorists. President Obama himself has said that Guantanamo has probably ?created more terrorists around the world than it ever detained.
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> ?There is also no question [5],? Obama said in a May 2009 speech, that Guantanamo has undermined ?America?s strongest currency in the world? -- our ?moral authority.?

Like many Catholics, I took heart at the sight of Pope Francis washing the feet of young prisoners on Holy Thursday. But it is not enough to gush at the symbolic. The pope?s gesture invites everyone to see the humanity of the imprisoned. The men in Guantanamo are yearning for our regard and intervention.

For more on the fast, go to witnesstorture.org [6]*.

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Links:
[1] http://witnesstorture.org/
[2] http://ncronline.org/../48166
[3] http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/get-serious-about-closing-guantanamo/2013/03/28/099afa46-955b-11e2-b6f0-a5150a247b6a_story.html

[4] http://atwar.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/03/21/pentagon-wants-to-build-new-prison-at-guantanamo/
[5] http://voices.washingtonpost.com/44/2009/05/21/obama_on_national_security_and.html
[6] http://www.witnessagainsttorture.org/