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It is time to free the Guantanamo hunger strikers

Art Laffin | Apr. 30, 2013
Viewpoint

The biblical admonition "to proclaim liberty to captives" (Luke 4:18 [1]) has taken on critical urgency with respect to the 166 prisoners being held at the U.S. military prison at Guantanamo Bay. To protest their unjust indefinite detention and dehumanizing mistreatment, many prisoners are now in the third month of a hunger strike, and with each passing day, their health deteriorates.

On April 13, prison guards moved prisoners from communal housing to individual cells. As some prisoners resisted, guards used less-than-lethal rounds [2] to subdue them, according to military spokesmen. It is not known how seriously injured these prisoners may be.

Adnan Latif, who spent more than 10 years in Guantanamo without being charged, would often go on a hunger strike to protest his unjust confinement. A Yemeni citizen, poet, father and husband, Latif was subject to severe beatings, druggings and torture. He had been cleared for release at least four separate times, yet continued to be imprisoned. On Sept. 8, Latif was found dead [3] in his cell. He is one of the nine men to die at Guantanamo. No independent investigation has been conducted into any of these deaths. In Latif's own words, he asks [4]: "Where is the world to save us from torture? Where is the world to save us from the fire and sadness? Where is the world to save the hunger strikers?"

How many more prisoners will die before justice is rendered on their behalf? People of faith have a special moral responsibility to make sure these men do not die. What can be done to save the lives of these prisoners?

In the last two weeks, there have been solidarity fasts and vigils across the United States to call for immediate action on behalf of the Guantanamo prisoners, including a national "Day of Action to Close Guantánamo & End Indefinite Detention" on April 11.

From New York City to San Francisco, Durham, N.C., to Los Angeles, from Hartford, Conn., to Washington, D.C., Witness Against Torture, Amnesty International, the Center for Constitutional Rights, World Can't Wait and other groups demanded the closure of Guantánamo. The same day, 25 prominent human rights and civil liberties organizations sent a letter [5] to President Barack Obama urging the closure of Guantánamo.

"The vast majority of the 166 men still trapped at Guantánamo have been held for more than 11 years without charge or fair trial," said organizers of the protests in a news release [6]. "The Obama administration must take swift measures to humanely address the immediate causes of the hunger strike and fulfill its promise to close the Guantánamo detention facility."

The coalition urged Obama to:

- "Direct Secretary of Defense Charles Hagel to use his authority to issue the certifications or national security waivers required by the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA 2013) to effect transfers from Guantánamo;

- Appoint an individual within the White House to lead the effort to close Guantánamo;
- Make the case to Congress and the American people for removing the remaining transfer restrictions and closing the detention facility; and
- Ensure that all detained men are either charged and fairly tried in criminal court, or released to countries that will respect their human rights." (Eighty-six prisoners have been officially cleared for release yet they continue to languish.)

Witness Against Torture has also coordinated other actions, including a "rolling fast" that will continue around the country for the duration of the hunger strike; hundreds of phone calls and 500 letters to congressional representatives and the White House; ongoing public vigils; and nonviolent civil resistance.

On April 22, 12 Witness Against Torture members were arrested in New York City after a "die-in" on the steps of the federal courthouse at Manhattan's Foley Square. And during the last two Friday vigils at the White House, a number of notable speakers have called for the closing of Guantanamo and for an end to indefinite detention and torture, including Tom Wilner and Kristine Huskey, lawyers who have represented Guantanamo prisoners; retired Col. Morris Davis, chief prosecutor for the Guantanamo Military Commissions from 2005 to 2007; T.C. Morrow* of the National Religious Campaign Against Torture; and Pat Davis, Mary Harding and Gizache Emiru of the Torture Abolition and Survivors Support Coalition.

As the hunger strike has grown, more prominent protests have emerged. On April 5, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, said the failure of the U.S. to close the Guantanamo Bay detention facility is a "clear breach of international law [7]." Pillay was critical of the "continuing indefinite incarceration" of detainees still be held in detention and the "systemic abuse of individuals' human rights" there."

On April 26, *The New York Times* *[8]*editorial board wrote [8]: "That prison should never have been opened. It was nothing more than [President George W.] Bush's attempt to evade accountability by placing prisoners in another country. The courts rejected that ploy, but Mr. Bush never bothered to fix the problem. Now, shockingly, the Pentagon is actually considering spending $200 million for improvements and expansions clearly aimed at a permanent operation ... But whatever Mr. Bush says about how comfortable he is with his "tough" choices, the country must recognize the steep price being paid for what is essentially a political prison. Just as hunger strikes at the infamous Maze Prison in Northern Ireland indelibly stained Britain's human rights record, so Guantánamo stains America's."

And on Capitol Hill, Sen. Dianne Feinstein has called on Obama [9] to restart the transfer of prisoners cleared for release to their homelands or third countries and urged the removing of barriers on the repatriation of Yemeni prisoners.

As of Tuesday, the military confirmed [10] more than 100 men are on a hunger strike, with 21 being force fed and 5 hospitalized. The forced tube feeding, according to those prisoners who have experienced it, is itself an act of torture.

The time is now to proclaim liberty to the Guantanamo prisoners.

**A previous version of this story misspelled T.C. Morrow's name.*

[Art Laffin is a member of the Dorothy Day Catholic Worker and Witness Against Torture.]

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[1] http://www.usccb.org/bible/luke/4/
[2] http://metro.co.uk/2013/04/14/guards-fire-rubber-bullets-as-violence-breaks-out-at-guantanamo-bay-3615122/
[3] http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/16/opinion/sunday/death-at-guantanamo-bay.html
[4] http://www.examiner.com/article/obama-administration-gives-50-million-to-keep-guantanamo-open-indefinitely
[5] http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/04/11/joint-letter-president-obama-closing-guantanamo
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[9] http://atwar.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/04/25/senator-urges-transfer-of-guantanamo-detainees-to-yemen-amid-revolt/
[10] http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2013/04/29/189883/more-navy-medics-arrive-at-guantanamo.html#.UX_kyMpc1qw