

# Amnesty International report: conditions for Guantánamo prisoners worsening

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A report released Thursday by Amnesty International (AI) describes “deteriorating” conditions at the infamous Guantánamo Bay, Cuba prison camp, citing an increase in the use of physical isolation to break prisoners, and an accompanying rise in mental health problems. The human rights group’s report calls for the immediate closure of the camp and affirms the right of victims to pursue reparations in US courts.

The report, “Cruel and Inhuman: Conditions of isolation for detainees at Guantánamo Bay,” dismisses assurances from US authorities that Guantánamo detainees are being treated “humanely” and afforded “high quality” medical care. The report draws a parallel between the inhuman conditions at Guantánamo and the conditions at “super-maximum” prisons operated inside the United States.

According to AI, the Guantánamo prison currently houses 385 men from around 30 countries. These prisoners, many of whom have been incarcerated for more than five years, are being denied all rights associated with US and international law. None have had their cases reviewed by any legitimate court, and are being held in violation of fundamental democratic principles.

In December 2006, according to the report, a facility dubbed “Camp 6” was opened in Guantánamo. Camp 6, which now houses about 165 individuals, “created even harsher and apparently more permanent conditions of extreme isolation and sensory deprivation in which detainees are confined to almost completely sealed, individual cells, with minimal contact with any other human being.”

AI describes Camp 6 as a compound “surrounded by high concrete walls with no windows visible on the façade.”

The prisoners “are confined for a minimum of 22

hours a day in individual steel cells with no windows to the outside. The only view from each cell is through strips of glass only a few inches wide in and adjacent to the cell door which looks onto an interior corridor patrolled by military police. There are no opening windows and detainees are completely cut off from human contact while inside their cells.”

Inmates are denied access to natural light and air; are not permitted to read the news, watch TV, or otherwise have any connection to the outside world; are not permitted to speak with other inmates; are denied pens, paper, watches, and most other basic items; are shackled whenever outside their cell; and are allowed only two hours of exercise a day.

Every effort is made to humiliate, isolate, disorient and otherwise break the prisoners. Bright fluorescent lights are kept on in the cells for 24 hours a day, temperatures are kept uncomfortably low, and female prison guards observe inmates while they shower and use the toilet. Letters from family and friends are delayed and heavily redacted, and access to legal counsel is severely restricted.

The report estimates that as many as 80 percent of Guantánamo inmates are held in conditions of extreme isolation, which are being used as an “interrogation technique or as punishment” in violation of international law.

The impact of extreme isolation, sensory deprivation and prolonged inactivity on the mental health of a human being is catastrophic. Mental health experts cited in the AI report described symptoms including “perpetual distortions and hallucinations, extreme anxiety, hostility, confusion, difficulty with concentration, hyper-sensitivity to external stimuli, and sleep disturbance ...”

The report warned that many inmates are

“dangerously close to full-blown mental and physical breakdown.”

The AI report cites the observations of lawyers who had visited clients before and after they were subjected to the regime described above.

“A document describing the impact on five Uighurs [an oppressed ethnic minority in China] of their transfer to Camp 6 states how they all expressed feelings of ‘despair, crushing loneliness, and abandonment by the world’ during visits with their lawyers in January 2007. None had been subjected to such strict conditions of isolation before. One detainee who during previous visits ‘had appeared gentle and pleasant, quick to laugh and smile,’ now ‘appeared to be in despair’ and said he was ‘beginning to hear voices.’ Another described how his cell neighbour was ‘constantly hearing voices, shouting out, and being punished.’”

In another account, a lawyer representing three other men wrote “that they had been ‘remarkably psychologically strong’ and hopeful during a visit in October but two had later been transferred to Camp 6 and one to Camp 5. During a visit to Camp 6 in January 2007 one of the men who had been vulnerable but bearing up well before was now ‘visibly shaken and in great despair’; he had reportedly not seen daylight in 15 days.”

One inmate cited in the report described Camp 6 as a “dungeon above ground.” US authorities defended the new facility on the grounds that it affords detainees more “privacy.”

More than 40 attempted suicides have been reported at Guantánamo, including the three widely-reported deaths in June of 2006. Numerous separate group hunger strikes over the past five years met brutal repression from the prison authorities. According to the report, inmates on hunger strike “were being force fed through nasal tubes, some while strapped to restraint chairs ... detainees have described being subjected to considerable pain as the tubes were inserted into their nostrils.

“One detainee reported how, three times, the tube had been inserted the wrong way so that it went into his lungs; he said he frequently vomited after being force-fed and was not given clean clothes. Guards have allegedly subjected hunger-striking detainees in one block to further punitive treatment, such as pepper spraying them or turning the air-conditioning up high.”

According to the Military Commissions Act, passed with the help of the congressional Democrats in October 2006, these men are outside the protection of US and international law, and have no rights to appeal their treatment in US federal court. That particular provision was upheld Monday by the US Supreme Court, when the court refused to hear habeas corpus petitions from two groups of Guantánamo prisoners. (See “US Supreme Court refuses to hear Guantánamo appeals”.)

The Guantánamo prison camp has become an international symbol of the consequences of the attacks on fundamental democratic rights associated with the so-called “war on terror” being waged by the United States. At times, even President Bush and Defense Secretary Robert Gates, in the face of popular outrage, have hinted that they would prefer to shut the base down. This week’s AI report makes clear, however, that Guantánamo is presently being expanded.



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