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Yemeni detainee dies in apparent suicide at Guantanamo

His death, which would be the fifth prisoner suicide at the detention center, renews criticism of U.S. policy and calls for Obama to keep his promise to close the offshore prison.

By Carol J. Williams
June 3, 2009

A 31-year-old Yemeni was found dead in his cell at the U.S. prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, in an apparent suicide, U.S. military officials said Tuesday.

Muhammad Ahmad Abdallah Salih would be the fifth prisoner to take his life at the detention center since the Pentagon began holding terrorism suspects there more than seven years ago.

The death late Monday spurred fresh criticism of the U.S. detention policy and demands that President Obama make good on his vow to close Guantanamo by January.

Obama has been trying to find countries to take some of the remaining 239 Guantanamo prisoners, about 100 of whom are from Yemen. Some allied countries have indicated that they will help depopulate the prison, but they want to see the U.S. take the first step by freeing those deemed no longer a threat and bringing other suspects to trial in U.S. civilian courts.

Salih was accused by the Pentagon of training in Afghanistan for a holy war against the U.S.

The prisoner, at Guantanamo since February 2002, was found "unresponsive and not breathing" when guards checked his cell Monday night, U.S. Southern Command spokesman Jose Ruiz said in a statement. Medical personnel tried to revive him but failed, and a physician pronounced him dead, Ruiz said.

Three Guantanamo detainees hanged themselves with sheets on June 10, 2006, in an apparently coordinated protest. Another prisoner died in May 2007, also reportedly by making a noose from bed linens.

An autopsy of Salih was pending, and a "cultural advisor" was overseeing the remains, which will be repatriated to Yemen after the postmortem, Ruiz said.

The Center for Constitutional Rights, which represents Guantanamo prisoners in habeas corpus cases, said: "The cost of keeping Guantanamo open could not be clearer at a time like this, both for the men there and for the perception of the U.S. in the world."

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