

THREE PRISONERS COMMIT SUICIDE AT GUANTÁNAMO

U.S. SEES ACTS AS PROTEST

Deaths Come Amid Rising
Criticism of Treatment
of Terror Detainees

By JAMES RISEN
and TIM GOLDEN

WASHINGTON, June 10 — Three detainees being held at the United States military prison at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, committed suicide early on Saturday, the first deaths of detainees to be reported at the military prison since it opened in early 2002, United States military officials said.

The deaths come at a time of mounting international criticism of the Bush administration's handling of terrorism suspects at Guantánamo and other prisons around the world. President Bush, who was at Camp David on Saturday, expressed "serious concern" about the deaths, said Tony Snow, the White House spokesman.

The three detainees were not identified, but United States officials said two were from Saudi Arabia and the third was from Yemen. Military officials said that the three hanged themselves in their cells with nooses made of sheets and clothing and died before they could be revived by medical personnel.

Rear Adm. Harry B. Harris Jr., the commander of the detention camp at Guantánamo, told reporters in a news conference that the deaths were discovered early on Saturday when a guard noticed something out of the ordinary in a cell and found that a prisoner had hanged himself. Admiral Harris said guards and a medical team rushed in to try to save the inmate's life but were unsuccessful. Then, guards found two other detainees in nearby cells had hanged themselves as well; all were pronounced dead by a physician.

Military officials on Saturday suggested that the three suicides were a form of a coordinated protest.

"They are smart, they are creative, they are committed," Admiral Harris said. "They have no regard for life, neither ours nor their own. I believe this was not an act of desperation, but an act of asymmetrical warfare waged against us."

The Naval Criminal Investigative Service has opened an investigation into the deaths, and the State Department has notified the governments of Saudi Arabia and Yemen, according to a statement issued on Saturday by the United States Southern Command, the military organization that oversees Guantánamo. All three men left suicide notes in Arabic, officials said. One of the detainees was a mid- or high-level Qaeda operative, another had been captured in Afghanistan and the third was a member of a splinter group,

Continued on Page 30

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Three Detainees Commit Suicide at Guantánamo Prison

Continued From Page A1

Admiral Harris said, in an account by The Associated Press. He said all three had participated in hunger strikes at the detention center.

He said the acts were tied to a "mystical" belief at Guantánamo that three detainees must die at the camp for all the detainees to be released. There have been 41 suicide attempts by 25 detainees since the facility opened, officials said.

Lawyers for the detainees, human rights groups and legal associations have increasingly questioned whether many of the prisoners can even rightfully be called terrorists. They note that only 10 of the roughly 465 men held at Guantánamo have been charged before military tribunals, and that recently released documents indicate that many have never been accused even in administrative proceedings of belonging to Al Qaeda or attacking the United States.

Advocates for the detainees said they believed the suicides resulted from the deep despair felt by inmates who are being held indefinitely.

"The total, intractable unwillingness of the Bush administration to provide any meaningful justice for these men is what is at the heart of these tragedies," said Bill Goodman, the legal director of the Center for Constitutional Rights, the New York advocacy group that oversees lawyers representing many of the detainees. "We all had the sense that these men were getting more and more hopeless. There's been a general sense of desperation that's been growing."

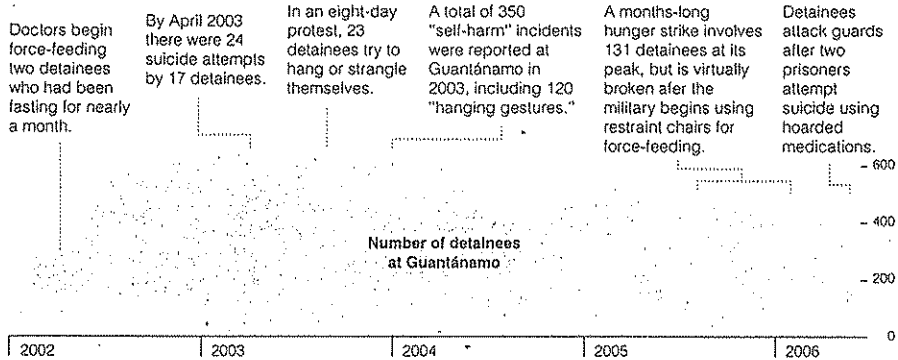
Joshua Colangelo-Bryan, a lawyer at Dorsey & Whitney in New York who represents one detainee who has repeatedly attempted suicide, said, "These men have been told they will be held at Guantánamo forever. They've been told that while they're held there they do not have a single right." Foreign governments and international organizations have stepped up their criticism of detainee treatment at Guantánamo. Just last month, a United Nations treaty panel reviewing the United States' compliance with the international prohibition on torture argued that Guantánamo should be shut down. Last week, the Council of Europe issued a separate investigative report that said the United States had created a "reprehensible network" of dealing with terror suspects, highlighted by secret prisons believed to be in Eastern Europe and other nations around the world.

Responding to the growing furor over the issue in Europe, President Bush said in an interview with German television in May that he would like to close the Guantánamo prison, but that his administration had to await the outcome of a Supreme Court ruling on whether the detainees should be tried by civilian courts or military commissions.

Meanwhile, the situation inside the detention center has grown more volatile in recent months, with reports that prisoners have engaged in hun-

A Troubled Detention Center

Since January 2002 the military has reported 41 suicide attempts at Guantánamo, as well as dozens of incidents classified as "manipulative, self-injurious behavior." Three suicides yesterday were the first reported deaths.



Sources: Department of Defense; interviews

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ger strikes, other suicide attempts and violent attacks on guards.

Lawyers for the detainees have predicted for months that some would kill themselves. They have complained repeatedly about their access to the detainees, and have litigated in federal courts to try to get more information about the prisoners' medical and psychological health.

The lawyers have also strenuously protested the administration's efforts to have all litigation over the treatment of the detainees dismissed under the Detainee Treatment Act, a law signed by President Bush on December 30 that would strip the courts of jurisdiction to hear habeas corpus petitions from detainees.

Action on nearly all of those petitions has been suspended in recent months, pending a ruling by the Supreme Court this month on the case of a former driver for Osama bin Laden. While Defense Department officials took new measures to try to break a wave of hunger strikes that began last summer, they also undertook a review of the procedures they would follow in the event of detainee deaths.

In public statements, Defense Department officials have often dismissed the detainees' suicide attempts as less than serious and as the actions of trained Qaeda terrorists to manipulate public opinion. The first hunger strikes by detainees at Guantánamo began soon after the camp opened in January 2002, and two of those prisoners were forcibly fed through tubes that year. Dozens of other suicide attempts followed.

Over one eight-day period in August 2003, 23 detainees tried to hang or strangle themselves, including 10 on a single day. But the Pentagon did not disclose the episode until January 2005, and lawyers for the detainees have complained about what they say has been a pattern in which the government has withheld information about suicide attempts or minimized their importance.

In late 2003, military officials at Guantánamo began to re-classify many of the suicide attempts as

"manipulative, self-injurious behavior" that was intended to bring pressure for better conditions or for release. Officials at Guantánamo acknowledged that those designations were not necessarily made after any formal psychological evaluation.

But early last summer, as a new wave of protests broke out, officials at Guantánamo and at the Pentagon grew increasingly concerned, Defense Department officials said.

Doctors overseeing the treatment of detainees at Guantánamo sought new guidance from the Pentagon about the circumstances under which they could force-feed hunger strikers by tubes inserted through

chairs" while they were force-fed.

After the use of the chairs was disclosed by The New York Times in February, military officials insisted that they were acting only to save the lives of hunger-striking detainees who were precariously close to serious harm or death.

But Defense Department records and military officials suggest that only a handful of the detainees who were then being force-fed had lost so much weight that they were classified by doctors there as "severely malnourished." The restraint chair was used on all of those who refused to eat, military officials said, regardless of their medical condition.

For months after the use of the restraint chairs became public, lawyers for the detainees and other critics of United States detention policy predicted that the tougher measures would push the prisoners to take more radical steps to end their lives.

What may have been the most serious such incident before Saturday's suicides came on May 18, when two detainees were found unconscious in their cells after ingesting a large quantity of anti-anxiety medication that various prisoners had apparently hoarded for the purpose. Another detainee said he had also tried to commit suicide but did not have enough medication; military officials said they did not believe his attempt had been serious.

Military officials said other detainees violently attacked guards in subsequent searches of their cells. A few of the detainees have since told their lawyers that the upheaval was provoked by guards who mistreated the prisoners' Korans as they tore through their cells.

Another brief hunger strike began barely two weeks later, the military authorities said, and eventually involved some 75 detainees. The chief spokesman for the military task force charged with guarding and interrogating the detainees, Cmdr. Robert Durand of the Navy, described that episode, like others before it, as an "attention getting" effort intended to increase public pressure for their release.

A situation grows more volatile as protests mount.

their noses and into their stomachs.

The officials said a new initiative was undertaken this year to discourage the detainees from killing themselves by having military and medical personnel and cite passages in the Koran that condemn suicide. The detainees were also systematically told that annual reviews of their status as "enemy combatants" had been completed, that they would remain at Guantánamo for at least another year, and that they should reconcile themselves to the situation, Defense Department officials said.

At that time, the Pentagon also began to reassess its procedures for the burial of detainees or the transfer of their remains in the event that any of them succeeded in committing suicide, military officials said.

The military's review of the hunger-strike issue, which included senior Pentagon officials and officers of the United States Southern Command, which oversees Guantánamo, eventually led to a decision to begin strapping those detainees who refused to eat into metal "restraint