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## **Obama's "Humane" Guantánamo Is a Bitter Joke** **by Andy Worthington**

The “war on terror” prison at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, where the majority of the remaining 242 prisoners have been held for seven years without charge or trial, “complies with the humanitarian requirements of the Geneva Conventions,” according to a government official who spoke to the [New York Times](#) after reading an 85-page report prepared for President Obama by Adm. Patrick M. Walsh, the vice chief of naval operations.

The report was commissioned by the president, on his second day in office, as part of an executive order dealing with [the closure of Guantánamo](#). In it, he directed Defense Secretary Robert Gates to ensure that the Guantánamo prisoners were being held in conditions that comply with the Geneva Conventions regarding the humane treatment of prisoners, adding, “Such review shall be completed within 30 days and any necessary corrections implemented immediately thereafter.”

According to the government official, the report’s only recommendations for improving conditions at Guantánamo are “to increase social contact among the 16 prisoners described by the Bush administration as ‘high-value detainees,’” who are held in seclusion in Camp 7, and to allow more communal recreation time for prisoners in Camps 5 and 6.

The former, modeled on the Miami Correctional Facility in Bunker Hill, Indiana, and used, initially at least, to house non-compliant prisoners and those regarded as being of significant intelligence value, was long regarded as the most oppressive of Guantánamo’s cell blocks (outside of the specific isolation blocks, including the notorious Camp Echo, where a small number of prisoners are held in permanent solitary confinement), but it soon lost its reputation after Camp 6 opened in December 2006. Modeled on a maximum-security prison in Lenawee County, Michigan, Camp 6 is one of Guantánamo’s busier blocks, and is used to house prisoners of no particular significance, as well as others who have been cleared for release, even though their confinement involves incarceration in solid-walled, windowless cells for up to 23 hours a day.

## **Improvements at Guantánamo**

Gitanjali Gutierrez, a lawyer at the Center for Constitutional Rights, noted that the authorities at Guantánamo had “recently increased detainees’ opportunities for recreation and social interaction,” and her comments were endorsed by Candace Gorman, the lawyer for two prisoners, who described on her website, [The Guantánamo Blog](#), a visit to her client [Abdul Hamid al-Ghizzawi](#) on February 4:

[I]n camp 6, they have now started “movie night.” Imagine my surprise when Mr. al-Ghizzawi mentioned a movie he was watching the week before my arrival. I actually stopped him in mid-thought and said, “Excuse me, movie night? When did that start?” He then explained that they have had movie nights once a week for a couple of weeks.

I of course asked if there was anything else that was new and he told me that the four cages that were the outdoor rec [recreation] area for Camp 6 were torn down and now there was one big cage and one little cage. Now eight men can go out together in the big cage and the small cage is for prisoners on punishment. How sad it is that this is a major improvement, but it is. It gives the men a chance to socialize, a chance to be a part of humanity, instead of being stuck in total isolation.

The last change he told me about was the opening of a new rec area, completely outside of Camp 6, a rec area where they can actually see the mountains in the distance, the trees, the sky, the sun (for four hours once every four or five days). The Camp 6 rec area is confined to the courtyard of Camp 6, so it is surrounded by the concrete facility that is several stories tall. All they could see in that outdoor area was the sand floor and the concrete building.

However, although these are significant changes, allowing the men, as Gorman observed, “a chance to socialize, a chance to be a part of humanity, instead of being stuck in total isolation,” it completely fails to address other outstanding problems with the treatment of the prisoners, which cannot be swept away by allowing them some limited respite from the prolonged isolation that has driven many of them to suffer severe mental-health problems.

## **Profound isolation**

Consider, for example, how the Pentagon continues to defend holding men in profound isolation, who, for the most, have never been charged with a crime, and who, in all cases, have never been convicted in a court of law. As the *Times* described it, the Pentagon “has long insisted that none of the men are held in solitary confinement. Military officials instead have said the prisoners are held in ‘single-occupancy cells.’” This is the kind of semantic maneuvering that typified the Bush administration, and it is, of course, brazenly dishonest. Although the report

apparently concedes that “some detainees have great difficulty communicating from cell to cell,” the truth is that they are held, almost permanently, in a state of chronic isolation, which cannot be wished away by describing it as detention in a “single-occupancy cell,” and cannot be effectively mitigated by allowing the prisoners a few hours’ escape to watch a movie or chat with their fellow inmates.

James Cohen, who visited Guantánamo in February 2007, soon after Camp 6 opened, explained that [conditions were worse](#) than in any Supermax prison on the U.S. mainland. He described a system of almost complete isolation, and pointed out that “although the prison was built with communal areas, such as those where U.S. maximum-security prison inmates are permitted to spend their time during the day, the prisoners of Camp 6 are not permitted access to these areas.” He contrasted this with the conditions in maximum-security prisons on the mainland, where “it is common for inmates to have jobs, to eat communally, to receive visits from family and friends and to have social contact with other inmates.”

For some first-hand perspective on the profound isolation of the cells in Camp 6, this is how I described the experiences of the Bahraini prisoner [Isa al-Murbati](#) (who was released in August 2007), as related just before his release by his lawyer, Joshua Colangelo-Bryan:

Colangelo-Bryan reported that the guards in Camp 6 “run large fans,” which “sound like jet engines and prevent captives from communicating and deprive them of sleep,” and explained, “In his cell, Isa cannot see other detainees and he can barely communicate with them. He told me that it is possible to speak with his brothers through an air conditioning vent in his cell. However, to reach the vent, Isa has to stand on his cement bunk. Most often if he tries to talk to others this way, guards tell him to get off his bunk. They also threaten to take away the few items that Isa has in his cell if he does not follow their directions,” which “forces him to crouch to talk under the door, for which he is also berated if caught.”

In May 2008, Sabin Willett, who represents the 17 Uighurs in Guantánamo who have been cleared of being “enemy combatants,” but who are still held because no other country has been found to accept them (and [the United States will not take them](#)), gave [the following testimony](#) about two of his clients to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs’ Subcommittee on International Organizations, Human Rights and Oversight:

You try talking to a man who only wants to see the sun. You will never forget the experience.... In his cell, [Huzaifa Parhat](#) can crouch at the door, and yell through the crack at the bottom. The fellow in the next cell may respond, or he might be curled in the fetal position, staring at the wall. Another Uighur told us of the voices in his head. The voices were getting the better of him. His foot was tapping on the floor. I don't know what's happened to him: he doesn't come out of the cell to see us anymore.

Other reports were blunter still. “I am in my tomb,” [Abdulli Feghouli](#), an Algerian released last August, explained. Another prisoner said, “I look alive, but actually I'm dead.”

### **The illegality of force-feeding prisoners**

More worrying still are Adm. Walsh's opinions about [the hunger strike](#) that has been raging at Guantánamo since the start of the year and which involves at least one-sixth of the prison's total population, who are being force-fed against their will, using restraint chairs and tubes inserted into the stomach through the nose.

As medical practitioners have made clear for decades, and as the [Lancet](#) explained in an editorial last September, force-feeding mentally competent prisoners has no place in civilized society. The editors, recognizing that “refusing to eat may be a prisoner's only weapon for making demands, to get access to justice or to protest against their conditions,” stated, “Prisoners or detainees who choose to become hunger strikers are entitled, worldwide, to the highest clinical standards of care available.” They added, pointedly, “Force-feeding has no place in that care,” and also explained, “Force-feeding used to be common in many countries, and is still used in Guantánamo Bay, despite the provisions of the Geneva Conventions, and the fact it is banned by the World Medical Association (WMA) in Declarations, to which the American Medical Association is a signatory.”

Despite this, Adm. Walsh's report turns the medical community's opinion on its head. According to the [Washington Post](#), the report concludes that force-feeding prisoners in Guantánamo is actually “in compliance with the Geneva Conventions' mandate that the lives of prisoners must be preserved.”

Presumably, Adm. Walsh also believes that any method used to coerce reluctant prisoners to be force-fed is also justified by the Geneva Conventions. Two weeks ago, I reported on [a visit to Binyam Mohamed](#), the British torture victim whose [release from Guantánamo](#) is imminent, by his military defense attorney, Lt. Col. Yvonne Bradley, who noted:

At least 50 people are on hunger strike, with 20 on the critical list, according to Binyam. The JTF [Joint Task Force] are not commenting because they do not want the public to know what is going on. Binyam has witnessed people being forcibly extracted from their cell. Swat teams in police gear come in and take the person out; if they resist, they are force-fed and then beaten. Binyam has seen this and has not witnessed this before. Guantánamo Bay is in the grip of a mass hunger strike and the numbers are growing; things are worsening.

It is so bad that there are not enough chairs to strap them down and force-feed them for a two- or three-hour period to digest food through a feeding tube. Because there are not enough chairs the

guards are having to force-feed them in shifts. After Binyam saw a nearby inmate being beaten it scared him and he decided he was not going to resist. He thought, “I don’t want to be beat, injured or killed.” Given his health situation, one good blow could be fatal.

### **Random violence at Guantánamo**

What is particularly disturbing about this report is not just the mass force-feeding, but the violence used by the “Swat teams” — the armored five-man teams, known as the Extreme Reaction Force (ERF), or the Immediate Reaction Force (IRF) — who have been used throughout Guantánamo’s history to quell even the most minor infractions of the rules with appalling brutality.

Moreover, the very latest report from Guantánamo suggests not only that the ERF teams are dealing heavy-handedly with the hunger strikers, but also that they are regularly involved in random assaults, as numerous prisoners have stated over the years, which have led to fractures and broken limbs, and, in two cases, to the loss of an eye, and damage to an Egyptian prisoner’s back that was so severe that he will spend the rest of his life in a wheelchair.

In a report on the medical examinations of Binyam Mohamed that were undertaken last week by British doctors who were allowed to visit him to ascertain if he was well enough to be flown back to the UK, the [Observer](#) stated that Mohamed “will return to Britain suffering from a huge range of injuries after being beaten by U.S. guards right up to the point of his departure from Guantánamo.” During the medical examinations, he “was found to be suffering from bruising, organ damage, stomach complaints, malnutrition, sores to feet and hands, severe damage to ligaments as well as profound emotional and psychological problems which have been exacerbated by the refusal of Guantánamo’s guards to give him counseling.”

Binyam’s civilian lawyer, Clive Stafford Smith, said that his client has been beaten dozens of times “for no reason,” with “the most recent abuse occurring during recent weeks,” and Lt. Col. Bradley added, “He has been severely beaten. Sometimes I don’t like to think about it because my country is behind all this.”

### **A whitewash?**

Clearly, the Guantánamo described by the British doctors who visited Binyam Mohamed last week is not the same as that envisaged by Adm. Walsh. Is this, then, a deliberate whitewash? Probably not. Like all official reports, Adm. Walsh’s report was not based on detailed, fly-on-the-wall observation of the conditions at Guantánamo, but on other reports submitted up the chain of command, in which the kind of brutality described — and suffered — by Binyam Mohamed simply does not register. Nevertheless, it will, presumably, be read as though it provides a true picture of the prison, even though what it leaves unsaid would drive anyone who truly believed in the humane treatment of the prisoners to fly out to Guantánamo immediately and personally

direct an overhaul of the prison operations that, once and for all, did away with the casual brutality that is built into the fabric of the place, and that has dominated its malign history for the last seven years.

Speaking of the early days of Guantánamo, Asif Iqbal, a British prisoner who was released in 2004, explained how several guards told him they had been briefed that the prisoners were “wild animals,” who “would kill them with our toothbrushes at the first opportunity, that we were all members of al-Qaeda and that we had killed women and children indiscriminately.” That was seven years ago, of course, but I very much doubt that new guards arriving for their tour of duty at Guantánamo are now being told that the status of the prisoners is unknown, and that they should be regarded as innocent men until proven guilty in a court of law. Instead, I strongly suspect that the Bush administration’s myth of Guantánamo — as the repository of “the worst of the worst” — lingers on throughout the chain of command at the prison, essentially unchallenged, and still promoted virulently in the right-wing media, and, occasionally, in the liberal media too.

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