

**GUANTANAMO, from page 1**

I broke fast at communion on Easter morning — followed by a salad back at my apartment — and I did so with a sense of guilt, anxiety and failure.

Would strikers persist to the point of death? Or would staff doctors call a halt? And how do doctors work in a prison camp anyway, and still keep their Hippocratic vow to keep the sick “from harm and injustice?”

The week had opened a place in my thought and prayer for 166 men I will never meet.

May they hold out, and may they take nourishment in hope, until they be nourished by food.

On Thursday, April 11, as the hunger strike entered its third month and some of the detainees having lost 30 or more pounds, WAT called a national Day of Action to Close Guantanamo and End Indefinite Detention. In New York and Washington, D.C., protesters in orange jump suits and black hoods held up signs: “Obama Close Gitmo” and I died waiting for change.”

In Portland, Linda Olson-Osterlund devoted her morning KBOO show, A Deeper Look, to the crisis at Guantánamo. She interviewed Pardiss Kebriaei, one of the lawyers with the Center for Constitutional Rights, the New York organization that

orchestrates the legal defense of detainees, including recruiting several years ago Oregon Public Defenders to take on seven of the cases.

Olson-Osterlund, who easily switches hats, the interviewer becoming the activist, told her listeners to call the White House and remind President Obama of his campaign promises to close this black hole.

Meanwhile, WAT had announced a “rolling fast,” and I signed up for two more days, committing also to write a detainee (I chose at random a Russian from Andy Worthington’s list), and to phone the Southern Command, the Defense Department and always the White House.

I was surprised by how hard it was to gracefully get out of a long and crazy conversation with the Southern Command’s Public Affairs Office in Florida. I spoke to a man whose cocky, cheerful voice belied a taste for argument.

I explained that I used to teach human rights.

Where?

At a local college.

What college?

Lewis & Clark.

I told him that we researched the cases of political prisoners around the world, worked up files on them, and advocated for their release. These were countries such as China, Iraq, Turkey, where prisoners were tortured and not necessarily brought to trial. It seems inconceivable that the United States has adopted those very practices.

This is not who we are, I told him.

He roared back at me: There are people out there who just want to let them die. We have to be responsible for their well-being.



Ravil Mingazov

Surely, no one enlists for this duty, the responsibility of forcing a man to eat, to live.

I eased out of the conversation by explaining I prayed for the guards whenever I prayed for the detainees. We’d been on the phone for 20 minutes.

His scorn, more than my fast, gave me a sense of solidarity with the men in their cells.

After the phone call, I looked up Ravil Mingazov, the detainee to whom I’d sent my letter: He was a ballet dancer with the Red Army Choir, for heaven’s sake, ordered released on May 13, 2010, by Judge Henry Kennedy of the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia.

My discouragement was complete.

Then, at his April 30 press conference, President Obama finally spoke:

“I’ve asked my team to review everything that’s currently being done in Guantanamo, everything that we can do administratively, and I’m going to re-engage with Congress to try to make the case that this is not something that’s in the best interests of the American people. ... [T]he idea that we would still maintain forever a group of individuals who have not been tried — that is contrary to who we are, it is contrary to our interests, and it needs to stop.”

The demonstrations and fasts orchestrated by Witness Against Torture, and the advocacy and encouragement practiced by Center for Constitutional Rights had helped the hunger strikers hold out, and the hunger strike had finally accomplished something: It captured the President’s attention. I don’t think he would have recommitted to closing the prison without the hunger strike. I was flabbergasted.

In human rights work, we celebrate the victories humbly, knowing we can never claim them to be ours. Instead, they are the result of hundreds, maybe thousands of people all working at the same time, alone and in the dark.

Now, nearly two-thirds of the 166 detainees are still on strike, and 40 new medical staffers have been sent to Guantánamo to “handle” the emergency.

The White House phone number is 202-456-1111.

Guantanamo by the numbers

- About 780 men have been brought to and held in Guantanamo since January 2002, all of whom were Muslim.
- 604 men have been transferred from Guantanamo.
- 166 men remain imprisoned at Guantanamo.
- 92 percent of the men ever held in Guantanamo are not “Al-Qaeda fighters,” by the U.S. government’s own records.
- 86 men have been cleared for release from Guantanamo but remain in detention, including 56 men from Yemen.

- 46 men are slated for indefinite detention without charge or trial. The government claims they can neither be released nor prosecuted.
- 22 or more prisoners were younger than 18 when captured.
- 12 or more men fear torture or persecution in their countries of nationality. These men will remain in detention until other countries offer them safe haven and a chance to rebuild their lives.
- 10 years or more is the length of time most men have been held at Guantanamo without charge or trial.

- 9 men have died in the prison, more than the number convicted in military commissions.
- 2 men have been forcibly transferred by the Obama administration to Algeria, despite their credible fears of abuse in Algeria.
- 0 senior government officials have been held accountable for the wrongful detention and torture at Guantanamo.

Source: Center for Constitutional Rights
www.CCRjustice.org



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