

U.S. prison at Guantanamo reportedly battling COVID outbreak



The U.S. flag flies above Guantanamo Bay in Cuba [File: Michelle Shephard/Pool via Reuters

Washington, February 12 (RHC)-- A reported outbreak of COVID-19 at the illegal U.S. Guantanamo Bay Detention Camp in eastern Cuba is causing concern for the legal counsel and family members of detainees amid a lack of transparency about the status of those affected.

“As I understand it, many detainees in both camps have contracted COVID within the last couple of weeks, although the U.S. government will not confirm numbers,” Alka Pradhan, an international human rights lawyer who represents one of the detainees at Guantanamo, told Al Jazeera. She added it was not clear how the virus was introduced to the camps and that some of the camp’s guards were also ill.

“It’s a massive outbreak,” another source familiar with the situation and speaking on condition of anonymity told Al Jazeera. “This is the most severe outbreak in the detainee population in the camp itself ever and it is the first time that something like this has happened on this scale.” “As Guantanamo is so politically sensitive, the U.S. government should be making handling it a priority.”

The highly secretive U.S.-run prison in Cuba, which opened as part of the so-called “war on terror” in the wake of the September 11, 2001 attacks, currently has some 34 detainees split across two camps.

The outbreak is thought to have been gathering momentum since last month. “It took days for the government to notify any of the lawyers that their clients had tested positive and when we asked about what treatment options were available, we were told to file a discovery request,” Pradhan said.

A discovery request is the formal process of exchanging information between legal parties about the witnesses and evidence to be presented at trial. “Secrecy is the priority, not care.”

While Guantanamo Bay once held some 780 prisoners, it now operates only Camp 5 and Camp 6 – the first for so-called “high value” detainees and the second for those designated “low value.” “High-value” inmates are those who were transferred to Guantanamo in 2006 and 2007 after being held at overseas CIA facilities known as “black sites”, where they were subjected to torture including beatings, waterboarding and sexual assault.

Many of the men are suffering from health conditions as a result of their treatment and prolonged detention. Pradhan told Al Jazeera that her client, Ammar al Baluchi, tested positive for COVID-19 two weeks ago at Camp 5 and that his condition was worrying because of his existing health issues.

Baluchi, a 45-year-old Pakistani national, is accused of helping to facilitate the 9/11 attacks and acting as a financial courier for al-Qaeda founder Osama bin Laden, although he is still awaiting trial at a military court at Guantanamo.

“Ammar already suffers from brain damage, multiple traumatic brain injuries (TBIs) and sleep disturbances (inability to sleep for more than a couple of hours at a time) from his torture in CIA custody from 2003 to 2006,” Pradhan said.

“He is also in cognitive decline as a result of his untreated TBIs. The added COVID symptoms of brain fog and extreme fatigue have been extremely worrisome, and we have asked about his treatment in the hopes that he will not suffer from long COVID.”

Pradhan added that Baluchi is vaccinated against COVID-19 but it is thought that some other detainees at the facility have refused the vaccine because they do not trust the authorities. “These are old men and some of them have comorbidities,” a source familiar with the layout of the camps told Al Jazeera, adding that COVID-19 could easily spread at the site due to the relatively relaxed atmosphere in recent years, particularly at Camp 6 that houses the detainees who did not arrive at Guantanamo via the CIA sites.

“The camp is made up of four atriums and a collective living space and houses around 20 prisoners. It’s like a medium-security prison,” the source said. Even the Camp 5 detainees have some freedom of movement during the day. They can move between blocks and spend time in communal prayer and food areas where they can mingle.

One of them is Indonesian national Encep Nurjaman, who is more widely known as Hambali. The 58-year-old is accused of having masterminded the Bali Bombings in 2002, which left more than 200 people dead and a further 200 injured when multiple bombs ripped through a popular nightlife area on the island of Bali in Indonesia. Hambali was arrested in Thailand in 2003 and charged last year. His trial has yet to start.

It is believed that Hambali is one of the detainees who has contracted COVID-19 as a result of the recent outbreak. When contacted by Al Jazeera, Hambali's brother Gun Gun declined to comment on the current status of his brother's health.

According to lawyer Pradhan, the COVID-19 outbreak highlights the veil of secrecy and incompetence that has long surrounded medical issues at the prison. "Medical care is a joke at Guantanamo, and legal experts have found that the U.S. government is actively committing torture by withholding proper medical care to the detainees," she said.

She says the U.S. government prioritises the secrecy of its torture programme by refusing to take patient histories and that the lack of these histories makes it difficult for detainees to be given comprehensive medical care. "It is not currently possible to provide complex medical or psychological care at Guantanamo. The U.S. government needs to acknowledge that they have an ageing population of torture victims who need proper care and allow for independent torture rehabilitation and other medical experts to evaluate the detainees and provide treatment," she added.

Another source familiar with the military base added that while the prison has some limited medical equipment such as ventilators, which have been used when performing rudimentary surgery in the past, it does not have more sophisticated equipment that would be needed if detainees were to become seriously ill with illnesses including COVID-19.

Legally, international protections such as the Geneva Conventions guarantee the right to medical care for all prisoners. However, the US government has routinely said detainees at Guantanamo Bay are not subject to such protections as they are considered "enemy combatants" rather than prisoners.

Human rights groups have condemned the absence of medical care at Guantanamo, particularly in light of the latest COVID-19 outbreak. "The recent reports about Guantanamo detainees contracting COVID highlight our ongoing concerns about the secrecy surrounding their conditions of detention and the quality of the healthcare they are receiving," Daphne Eviatar, Amnesty International's U.S. director of Security with Human Rights, told Al Jazeera.

She added that there have been many instances of detainees receiving substandard care over the years, in part due to the US Congress's refusal to allow any of them to travel to the US.

"The whole Guantanamo situation – Muslim men held for decades without charge or trial, with inadequate healthcare or treatment for the trauma many of them endured having been tortured by U.S. agents – is appalling and must come to an end."

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