

Editorial

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President Obama was eloquent Tuesday in describing why the situation at the Guantanamo Bay prison is “unsustainable.” He was justified in blaming Congress for [frustrating his effort to close the facility](#). But he was disingenuous in failing to acknowledge that [his own actions](#) — or his own inaction — have substantially contributed to an impasse that has prompted more than half of Guantanamo’s inmates to undertake a hunger strike.

One hundred and sixty-six [terrorism suspects remain at Guantanamo](#), of whom 86 have been cleared for transfer to their home nations. After overseeing more than 70 repatriations or other prisoner transfers during the first years of his administration, Mr. Obama suspended those to Yemen after the attempted Christmas Day bombing of an airliner in 2010; in 2011 and 2012 he signed defense bills imposing all-but-unmeetable conditions on any other transfers.

This year, Congress granted the Defense Department waiver authority that could have allowed transfers to resume, but the administration has not followed through. Instead, the State Department reassigned the senior ambassador who had been seeking to arrange repatriations.

Moreover, the Pentagon has failed to set up a promised new system for reviewing the cases of prisoners that Mr. Obama ordered established more than a year ago — which means that Guantanamo inmates are receiving less review of their cases than they did during the Bush administration. It’s little wonder that many have grown desperate enough to try starving themselves to death.

[At his press conference](#), Mr. Obama promised to “go back at” the Guantanamo issue and said he would seek help from Congress. For the prison to close, lawmakers would have to lift a ban on transferring prisoners to the United States. But it was good that Mr. Obama also pledged to

“examine every option that we have administratively” — because there are steps he could take without Congress.

The first would be to arrange for the transfer of some of the 27 non-Yemeni prisoners who have been cleared for transfer; there are also three Uighurs who have been cleared but who cannot be returned to China. One Saudi citizen, Shaker Amr, is a former British resident whose return Britain has requested; there are also Algerians and Moroccans. While there are legitimate concerns that detainees could return to terrorist activity, in many cases the risk is reasonable. Mr. Obama should also insist on implementation of his plan for periodic review boards for inmates not yet cleared for transfer.

The administration, meanwhile, should begin working with Yemen's new president on creating conditions for the return of the 56 Yemenis cleared for transfer, a step called for last week by Senate intelligence committee chairman Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.). Even with good will, this would take time and resources; Yemen remains an active base for al-Qaeda. But a start should be made at identifying or constructing secure facilities and creating programs to manage Yemeni repatriates.

What is needed above all is genuine political commitment from Mr. Obama. Having vowed to close Guantanamo, he backed away from the project in the face of political resistance. That resistance may be, as he argued yesterday, unreasonable; but it won't be overcome if the president doesn't make it a priority.