

By Andy Worthington

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On Friday, I received [an alarming message](#) from inside Guantánamo, from a reliable source who described the impact of the prison-wide hunger strike, now nearing the three-month mark, by stating that the guards were “putting people in isolation and all day long making lots of noise by speaking loudly, running on the metal stairs and leaving their two-way radios on all day and night. People cannot sleep.”

The source added, “There are at least four people that are at the very edge and one named Khiali Gul from Afghanistan is in a bad shape and cannot move and cannot talk or eat or drink. When other detainees tell the guards about him, they say, ‘When he is completely unconscious, then we will take him.’ The chances are that he will die.”

I have been reporting on the hunger strike since it first became public knowledge in February, and it is reports like the one above, and the statements that have been featured in prominent newspapers — by Samir Moqbel, a Yemeni, in the [New York Times](#), and Shaker Aamer, the last British resident in Guantánamo, in the

[Observer](#)

— that have helped to put the spotlight back on Guantánamo, after several years in which most people had lost interest.

President Obama took office in 2009 promising to close Guantánamo within a year, but when he failed to do so, through his own inaction and obstruction in Congress, the mainstream media and the American people largely moved on, even though the injustice of Guantánamo ought to become more pronounced rather than less the longer it is open.

Of the 166 men still held at Guantánamo, [86 were cleared for release](#) by an inter-agency task force established by the President in 2009, but are still held with no end in sight to what is their indefinite detention — for the rest of their lives, unless there is a major change in the way

America operates. If these men's indefinite detention was not quite planned, 46 others have [an executive order](#), issued by President Obama in March 2011, to thank for their predicament. Found to be too dangerous to release, even though no evidence exists that could be used in court (meaning that it is fundamentally unreliable), they were promised periodic reviews of their cases when they were consigned to life imprisonment without charge or trial, but those reviews [have never materialized](#).

When these facts are known, the hunger strike becomes readily comprehensible, and now that some key parts of the mainstream media have woken up to the ongoing injustice of Guantánamo — and, fortunately, show no sign of giving up on it in the aftermath of [the Boston bombings](#), which some dark forces within America wanted to use to stir up a whole new wave of Islamophobia — it remains crucial that the voices of the men continue to be heard.

Last week, Jason Leopold of [Truthout](#) helped to keep the spotlight on some of the men that the prisoners themselves claim are refusing food, through discussions with their lawyers. The US authorities, having initially responded to the news of the hunger strike by claiming that it didn't exist, have steadily been acknowledging that it does, and have been revising their figures upwards of the numbers of prisoners taking part. As of April 26, [the military stated](#) that 97 prisoners are hunger strikers, that 19 are being force-fed, and that five have been hospitalized. Even this, however, fails to match the prisoners' own claims that around 130 of the remaining prisoners are on the hunger strike.

One of those on the hunger strike is Abdulsalam Al-Hela, a 45-year old Yemeni businessman kidnapped in Egypt in September 2002 and held in "black sites" before his transfer to Guantánamo in September 2004. As Leopold described it, he "does not understand why he and other Guantánamo prisoners reside in a perpetual state of legal limbo." In a meeting in March, he asked his attorney, David Remes, "Can it really be true that US, with all its power, all over the world, can't solve the problems of 100 men?"

Al-Hela has been on the hunger strike since the first day, February 6, and is "gaunt and weak" like most of the hunger strikers. Remes told Leopold that he "walks with the aid of an aluminum cane," and "has lost more than 30 pounds" since the hunger strike began.

The hunger strike began in response to a change in the behavior of the guards. This apparently started last summer, when a new guard force arrived, and, as Leopold explained, “The Navy personnel who has previously patrolled the cellblocks were replaced by soldiers returning from tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan. Prisoners complained to their lawyers bitterly and often about being ‘tormented’ and ‘provoked’ by the guards.”

Carlos Warner, an attorney with the Office of the Federal Defender for the Northern District of Ohio, who represents [Fayiz al-Kandari](#), one of the last two Kuwaitis in the prison, “noted on March 20 that his client complained not only of guards ‘provoking’ the prisoners, but threatening to kill them — a claim that Pentagon and Guantánamo officials have vehemently denied in all cases.”

Fayiz has long been a resilient prisoner, regarded by the authorities as difficult because he had not been “broken” by years of interrogation, but he is now extremely weak, and, as his military defense team, led by Lt. Col. Barry Wingard, [explained](#) on April 14, “Reflecting on our latest trip to Guantánamo Bay, the picture of Fayiz keeps coming to our mind. Fayiz has become abnormally thin due to extreme loss of body weight. You could fit your hands around his waist with both hands touching.”

In Truthout, Jason Leopold also delved into an incident on January 2, a month before the hunger strike began, when non-lethal rounds were fired at a prisoner in the recreation yard for those in Camp 6, regarded as the most compliant and cooperative of the remaining prisoners, who were allowed to spend a lot of their time communally until a clampdown on April 13, when most of them were put in solitary confinement.



The authorities claimed that one prisoner tried to climb the fence and “a small crowd of detainees began throwing rocks at the guard tower,” after which the rounds were fired, and one Afghan was hit in the throat. However, Uthman Abdul Rahim Mohammed Uthman, a Yemeni, is one of several prisoners who said that “it wasn’t the prisoners who provoked the guard force, but a guard who overreacted” after a prisoner entered the recreation area against his wishes.

David Remes, who represents 13 Yemeni prisoners, provide unclassified notes of a meeting on March 7 with Uthman, which stated, “Detainee started shaking door (very common). Guard in tower pointed rifle at him. Brothers in yard started shouting. Guard swung around with his rifle and started shooting at them — just one bullet, which hit a detainee in the throat.”

Another Yemeni, Yasein Ismael, told Remes on March 5 that the prisoners were “surprised when a guard in a tower pointed a gun at detainees and shot into the group.” He said, “We were defenceless. We had no weapons.” He added that he spoke to the staff judge advocate, the people in the psychiatric ward, and the investigators, and said, “I told them I thought my life was in danger. I didn’t go out for a month because I thought I’d be killed by mistake or on purpose. They keep creating provocations, bringing Hummers with machine guns. No reason.”

Ismael, Remes said, weighed just 115 pounds when he saw him in March. He added that he “was unable to keep his balance and had to drink a ‘sugary water substance’ to remain alert.”

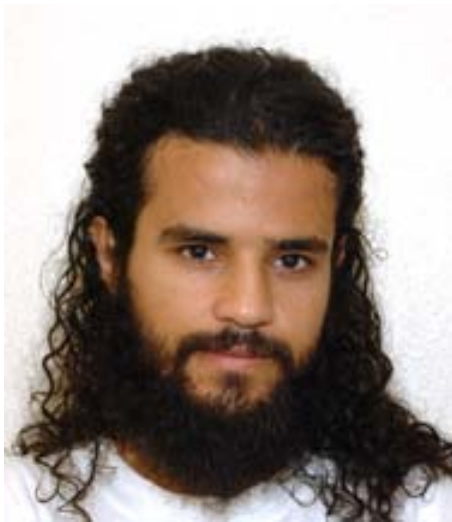
After the shooting incident, there was a five-day hunger strike. An officer in charge apparently met with the prisoners and apologized, but soon after legal papers were confiscated from the prisoners’ cells, and then came the Koran searches that caused the initial outrage amongst the prisoners, leading to the hunger strike that is still ongoing.

The trigger was apparently [the death, last September, of Adnan Latif](#), who allegedly hoarded medication that he used to kill himself. Investigators thought he might have hidden it in his Koran, leading Col. John Bogdan, the commander of Guantánamo’s Joint Detention Group, to order the prisoners’ Korans to be searched, despite protestations from the prisoners.

Yasein Ismael described how certain guards tried to provoke the prisoners. “We thought they wanted us to react violent to give excuse for them to harm us,” he said, and Uthman Abdul Rahim Mohammed Uthman added that some prisoners “started breaking cameras in their

cells.” Then came the Hummers. “[Three] groups, one with gun, one with sticks and one with shields,” Ismael said, adding, “Brothers tried to forestall attack by agreeing to be peaceful. A peaceful protest. We passed word to that block [that was attempting to dismantle surveillance cameras], who calmed down. So we foiled the Army’s plan. But the guards entered anyway. They used pepper spray on the men from large canister.”

Uthman explained, “That was the beginning of the [hunger] strike. We covered cameras, stopped attending classes, had sit-ins. Everyone went on the hunger strike.”



Noticeably, the prisoners “offered to surrender their Korans and end their hunger strike instead of having them searched,” as happened with a similar situation in 2006, but the authorities refused. Salman Rabeii, another Yemeni, said he “believes the offer was refused because Korans provide the prisoners with ‘spiritual strength, so you will kill yourselves if you take it away.’” He added that the authorities were afraid they would “look bad in the media” if they took the prisoners’ Korans away.

As the hunger strike has progressed, there have been several suicide attempts, largely dismissed by the authorities, and prisoners disappearing from Camp 6. As Leopold explained, “The lawyers’ notes exhaustively describe the accounts of prisoners who said they saw dozens of other detainees falling unconscious and being hauled off to the maximum-security camp [Camp 5] by medical personnel to be held in isolation as punishment for participating in the hunger strike, never to return to compliant Camp 6.”

Hussein Almerfedi, another Yemeni, told David Remes on March 5, “A detainee dropped unconscious. We do not know if he’s alive.” The day after, Abdulsalam Al-Hela said, “Brothers

try to revive the one who lost consciousness to spare him camps [i.e. Camp 5]. More than 20 have been sent to Camp 5, isolation, for punishment.”

Yasein Ismael said that, “in an attempt to break the hunger strike, the temperature in the cells was lowered to 62 degrees,” as Leopold put it. Ismael added, “That’s very cold, especially for weak men.” Others “said they were prohibited from discussing the hunger strike during phone calls with their family members, and if they uttered a word about it their calls would be disconnected.”

Meetings between officials and the prisoners have led to nothing. One involved “the colonel” — presumably Col. Bogden — and Salman Rabeii told Remes on March 7 that the “chief doctor” also tried to negotiate, but all attempts to negotiate have failed. The prisoners want freedom and justice, but neither are on offer.

In a letter to David Remes on March 11, Yasein Ismael wrote that the hunger strike “is going toward the worst. I believe I am going to die in this hunger strike and this might be my last letter, or today is probably my last day in this world.”

Two week ago, Remes told Leopold, “Ismael fell unconscious in his cell in Camp 5 and was moved to a hospital,” where he is now one of the 19 prisoners being force-fed.

The words above only touch on the horrors of Guantánamo as the men still held hold out for death or justice, but I believe, given the way they have been so shamefully abandoned by the Obama administration, Congress, the courts and the American people, that their despair is justified, and that their actions are indeed the only way for their plight to be noticed. The main question now is whether President Obama will act before any more of the prisoners in Guantánamo join Adnan Latif in death.