



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on March 26, 2013

As Desperate Detainees Hunger Strike, Pentagon Seeks \$150M Gitmo Upgrade

Anyone wondering why the inmates at America's prison camp in the Caribbean are starving themselves to death need look no further than this story from [NBC News](#): "The Pentagon is considering plans for a \$150 million overhaul of the U.S. detention facility at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba — including building a new dining hall, hospital and barracks for the guards — as part of an ambitious project recommended by the top general in charge of its operations."



In other words, despite [campaign promises](#) and an [executive order](#) from President Barack Obama — not to mention budget sequestration — Gitmo isn't going away.

With an operating budget of \$177 million to house just 166 detainees, Guantanamo is already costing taxpayers more than \$1 million per prisoner annually, making it "the country's most expensive prison per capita by far," according to NBC.

Now the Defense Department is seeking almost as much again to upgrade the camp: nearly \$100 million for new barracks for the 848 guards (more than five per prisoner), \$12 million for a dining hall for the troops, \$11.2 million for a hospital and medical unit for detainees, \$9.9 million for a complex where detainees can meet with their lawyers, and \$10.8 million for a "communications network facility" to store data. The camp is already getting a \$40 million boost in the form of a fiber optic cable being laid from southern Florida to Guantanamo "to improve Internet access, thereby allowing officials to have improved live video feeds of the military commission proceedings of the Sept. 11 hijackers," NBC reported.

With the sequester putting the squeeze on federal budgets, one might think the last place the Obama administration would want to spend more money is on a prison camp that the president has pledged to close and where, Gen. John Kelly, commander of the U.S. Southern Command, told the House Armed Services Committee, "everything ... is at least twice as expensive" as it is back in the United States.

"Gitmo seems to be the one place they don't care about spending money," David Remes, a defense attorney who represents detainees, told NBC. "They will spare no expense to keep these men there rather than bring them to the United States."

The detainees can see this quite clearly.

"They had great optimism that Guantanamo would be closed," Kelly told the House panel. "They were devastated, apparently ... when the president backed off — at least their perception — of closing the facility."

Kelly added that Obama "said nothing about it in his inauguration speech. He said nothing about it in his State of the Union speech. He has said nothing about it. He's not — he's not restaffing the office that ... looks at closing the facility."



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In January, Special Envoy Dan Fried, charged with finding new homes for the detainees, was notified that he was being reassigned and his office was being abolished. "In closing the special envoy position and transferring its portfolio to a State Department legal department ill-equipped to handle it, Obama has sent a clear message that he intends to maintain the present situation at the prison indefinitely," observed [Murtaza Hussain](#) of the *Guardian*.

That present situation, notes the Future of Freedom Foundation's [Andy Worthington](#), is such that "almost everyone still held at Guantanamo is being detained indefinitely without charge or trial."

Over half the detainees were cleared for release by a task force Obama personally established in 2009; but when the "underwear bomber," a Nigerian recruited in Yemen, attempted to blow up an airplane in December of that year, Obama issued an executive order banning the release of any Yemeni prisoners. "That," Worthington points out, "is in spite of the fact that two-thirds of the men the president's own task force recommended for release are Yemenis, and even though continuing to hold them constitutes imprisonment by nationality alone."

Congress shares in the blame for the continued detention of the remaining men. The 2013 National Defense Authorization Act essentially forbids the closure of Guantanamo and the transfer of its prisoners, tying the president's hands in that regard. However, Obama signed the bill into law knowing full well that this was the case, so he cannot claim to be an innocent bystander in all of this.

Just knowing they are most likely stuck in Gitmo for the rest of their lives would be enough to drive the detainees to despair. Compounding matters is that in recent months, prisoners have also been subjected to considerably worse treatment, according to Hussain:

Earlier this year, it was revealed that a detainee was shot in the neck by a guard, the first incident of gunfire known to have occurred in the camp's history. In addition to a pervasive atmosphere of violence at the facility — characterized by beatings and other forms of abuse by camp guards — detainees have increasingly had their meager personal effects confiscated or damaged, without cause or explanation. Mundane items such as family photos, letters and CDs have recently been taken away by camp guards and prisoners['] copies of the Qur'an have been desecrated under the guise of searching for contraband.

Having few options to protest their inhumane imprisonment, and figuring they are likely to die in Guantanamo anyway, the detainees have resorted to a hunger strike. The Obama administration at first denied that any such strike was taking place, but as of last week it had admitted that 25 men were on strike. Detainees' lawyers say that the number [tops 100](#) and that many of the strikers are in rapidly deteriorating health as a result of their malnourishment. NBC reports that eight of them are being force-fed through tubes, which Hussain writes is "an excruciatingly painful procedure that the UN Human Rights Commission has said it considers to be torture." (The Obama administration, like its predecessor, has refused to allow the UN's torture investigators access to Guantanamo prisoners — an admirable stand for U.S. sovereignty, perhaps, but given the administration's deference to international bodies in other matters, one that suggests a coverup.)

Absent a significant shift in U.S. policy, it seems likely that many of the prisoners will end up seriously debilitated or dead from lack of food. That might save taxpayers some money, but those savings would come at the cost of our historical commitment to "liberty and justice for all."

Obama seemed to understand this in 2008, and there is still time for him to rediscover it. While he couldn't force Congress to change the law to allow for the release of the prisoners, he could at least put



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the same type of effort into making it happen that he put into getting, say, the Affordable Care Act passed.

“This is something that really calls for leadership from the president — he needs to decide if he wants Guantanamo to be part of his legacy,” Omar Farah, staff attorney at the Center for Constitutional Rights, told Inter Press Service. “If the U.S. isn’t willing to charge someone in a fair process and can’t produce proper evidence of their crimes, then those prisoners have to be released. There is just no other way to have a democratic system. We’ve never had this kind of an alternative system of justice, and yet that’s what we have in Guantanamo.”



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