

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

April 16, 2013 at 10:03am

Hungering for justice at Guantanamo

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

On Saturday, U.S. military prison guards at Guantanamo fired rubber bullets at prisoners to try and stop their ongoing hunger strike. The prison reaction only exacerbates the situation. Reports indicate that many of the 166 prisoners at Guantanamo have been on a hunger strike since Feb. 6. (Although the U.S. military acknowledges 43 strikers, lawyers say the number is well above 100.) At least 13 are so thin and weak that they are being painfully force-fed. The United Nations Human Rights Commission has declared force-feeding prisoners "a form of torture," so one could argue the U.S. torture at Guantanamo continues at this very moment.

The grave injustice of Guantanamo must end immediately. President Barack Obama and the U.S. government need to address the issues of the hunger strikers now before a prisoner dies. The death of one of these prisoners will turn millions more around the world against us. Even if U.S. officials do not care for human rights, prisoners' deaths will be disastrous for the U.S.

But the demands of the hunger strike are perfectly reasonable and legal under international law. They want an immediate end to indefinite detention, torture and poor conditions.

Meanwhile, as many as 86 prisoners have been cleared for immediate release yet are still being held. They need to be released this week -- or better, today.

Most fundamental of all, the U.S. hellhole of Guantanamo needs to be closed immediately.

I think few Americans really understand what's happening at Guantanamo -- how we hold people indefinitely, refuse to allow them to stand in court, torture them, deny them water or health care or even access to lawyers. Why not let democracy play out, let them stand in court, or release them if they've been cleared for release? Or are we a totalitarian state?

The only way this will stop is if many more of us lend our voices to pressure the government to end its injustice and torture and return to democracy and justice.

Last week, Reuters reported that the president of the International Committee of the Red Cross called upon Obama to do what he could to end the hunger strike and close Guantanamo. Peter Maurer said he pressed Obama, senior administration officials and U.S. lawmakers to work harder to address the Guantanamo prisoners' legal predicament, according to Reuters.

U.N. Human Rights Chief Navi Pillay also called on Washington last week to close the Guantanamo prison, according to Reuters, saying the indefinite imprisonment of many detainees violated international law.

The facts of Guantanamo

The Center for Constitutional Rights lists a few basic facts about Guantanamo that are worth noting:

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- Approximately 779 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, according to the U.S. government, are not al-Qaida fighters.
- 86 men have been cleared for release from Guantanamo but remain in detention. Fifty-six are from Yemen.
- 46 men are slated for indefinite detention without charge or trial. The U.S. government says they will not be prosecuted or released.
- 22 or more prisoners were under 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 havens and a chance to rebuild their lives.
- Most men have been held at Guantanamo for 10 years or more without charge or trial.
- Nine men have died in Guantanamo.
- Zero senior government officials, including former President George W. Bush and former Vice President Dick Cheney, have been held accountable for the wrongful detention and torture at Guantanamo.

A letter from 25 human rights organizations

On Thursday, more than 30 protests were held across the country calling for an end to indefinite detention and torture and for the closing of Guantanamo. Besides the glaring human rights violations, protesters cited the high financial cost of maintaining the disastrous Guantanamo prison and the continued tarnishing of the U.S. image around the world.

Meanwhile, 25 prominent human rights organizations sent a letter to President Obama on Thursday calling for the immediate closing of Guantanamo and spelling out steps to end the hunger strike legally and humanely. Organizations included the Center for Constitutional Rights, the American Civil Liberties Union, Amnesty International, Center for Victims of Torture, Human Rights First, Human Rights Watch, National Lawyers Guild, and Physicians for Human Rights.

"If ever there were a moment to act upon the promise you made over four years ago to shutter the prison, it is now," the letter reads. "For several weeks, major news outlets, attorneys for the prisoners, and even military officials have been reporting that there is a large hunger strike occurring among the men detained at Guantánamo. The current situation is the predictable result of continuing to hold prisoners indefinitely without charge for more than 11 years. Therefore, we urge you to begin working to transfer the remaining detained men to their home countries or other countries for resettlement, or to charge them in a court that comports with fair trial standards. We also urge you to appoint an individual within your administration to lead the transfer effort."

"We urge you to order the relevant authorities to take swift measures to humanely and lawfully address the immediate causes of the hunger strike in a manner consistent with international standards of medical ethics before irreparable harm occurs to the prisoners," the letter concludes. "Moreover, we urge you to take steps to address the root of the problem by fulfilling your promise to close Guantanamo without further delay."

A recent editorial by *The Boston Globe* urged President Obama to close the prison because keeping Guantánamo open is "a challenge to our reputation around the world." In another editorial, *The New York Times* said the prisoners' action is "exposing the lawlessness of the system that marooned them there," and indefinite detention is the "essence of what has been wrong with Guantánamo from the start."

Over the last two weeks, friends at Witness Against Torture have held a national seven-day fast in solidarity with the hunger strikers that generated more than 500 letters to the prison, many phone calls to the White House and Pentagon, and helped facilitate protests in more than 30 cities Thursday. Witness Against Torture asks us to pressure the U.S. government to bring justice to the Guantanamo prisoners. They want us to flood the White House and Congress with phone calls as well as to fast, pray and vigil with the hunger strikers. Witness Against Torture has other ideas for what you can do.

Perhaps if more of us lend our voices to this campaign for justice, we will help save a few lives. Let's hope and pray that one day soon, we as a people will renounce torture and indefinite detention, return to the ideals of democracy and justice, uphold international law and every human right, and pursue nonviolent solutions to conflict.

This week, John Dear will give the keynote address at the Catholic School Chaplains of Ontario conference in Cornwall, Ontario. To see John's speaking schedule for 2013 or to invite him to speak in your church or school, go to John Dear's website. John is profiled in *Doing Time for Peace* by Rosalie Reigle and with Dan Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in *Divine Rebels* by Deena Guzder. One of John's essays on Jesus' nonviolent action in the temple appears in the new book *A Faith Not Worth Fighting For*.

His book *Lazarus, Come Forth!* and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings*, *Put Down Your Sword* and *A Persistent Peace*, are available from Amazon.com.

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