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Obama promised to close Guantánamo. Instead, he's made it worse

Facing deteriorating conditions and the hopelessness

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In his letters, Guantánamo Bay prisoner Shaker Aamer appeals in desperation to his captors and the outside world:

"Please ... torture me in the old way. Here they destroy people mentally and physically without leaving marks."

The 44-year-old British resident and father of four has spent over 11 years incarcerated at Guantánamo despite being cleared for release as early as 2007. To this day never charged with a crime, Aamer is just one of hundreds of detainees who remain imprisoned in Guantánamo. Despite running on an explicit campaign promise to shut down the island prison, which has become a symbol of the abuses of the "war on terror", President Obama has continued to preside over its operation.

And by recent accounts, under his tenure, the conditions for prisoners there – from both a physical and legal standpoint – have become markedly worse.

This past month, the majority of prisoners at Guantánamo began a hunger strike in protest of alleged mistreatment at the hands of guards at the facility. According to lawyers for over a dozen

men involved in the protest, after weeks of refusing food, their clients are "coughing blood, losing consciousness and becoming weak and fatigued". At least five men are reportedly being strapped down by guards and force-fed through their nostrils – an excruciatingly painful procedure that the UN Human Rights Commission has said it considers to be torture.

For the prisoners, the overwhelming majority of whom have never been charged with a crime and over 50 of whom have been cleared for release for years, this represents their last desperate avenue to protest their fate. Under President Obama's tenure, the Kafkaesque legal nightmare of detainees such as these has become even more entrenched.

The deterioration in detainees' living conditions is believed to be tied to a recent change in the military command of the prison. It has been reported that under the new command regime, mistreatment of prisoners has increased, exacerbating a situation already desperate after over a decade of torture, solitary confinement, and detainee deaths at the camp.

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.

To individuals who have spent over a decade imprisoned under draconian circumstances, separated from their families and without any foreseeable prospect of freedom, the latest round of degradations appear to have represented a breaking-point. In the words of Hilary Stauffer, of the UK-based legal charity Reprieve:

"These men are simply trying to pass their days in something that is a reasonable facsimile to 'normality', simply trying to survive. To have their small daily pleasures – their Qur'ans, their personal items – confiscated, or desecrated, is an unbearable indignity ... the saddest part is their only means of protest is a hunger strike – there is literally no other avenue available to them."

That the hunger strike is, in large part, a reflection of the increasing hopelessness of the detainees' situation is obvious to all parties, as well as a direct consequence of the policies of the Obama administration. The passage into law earlier this year of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) – which contained language and provisions intended to prevent the closure of Guantánamo and make the transfer of detainees from there impossible – has effectively doomed prisoners prospects of freedom.

Even those already cleared for release now face the prospect of indefinite incarceration at the facility – without even the pretense of legal recourse. Despite being publicly petitioned by human rights groups to veto the bill, the NDAA was signed by President Obama – a direct contradiction of his campaign promise to close the prison.

A further demonstration of the Obama administration's resolve to keep open Guantánamo and maintain the indefinite incarceration its prisoners came in the reassignment, in January, of Special Envoy Dan Fried. The man tasked with finding new homes for Guantánamo prisoners – a role described as "the most thankless job in Washington" – was notified early this year of his impending transfer and the abolition of his former post. 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.

Furthermore, the continued denial of access to Guantánamo prisoners for UN torture investigators has made clear that there will be neither a change in detainees' conditions nor any accounting for abuses. For the men at Guantánamo, the message is straightforward: whether they have been cleared for release or not, their freedom will not be forthcoming and their circumstances at Guantánamo will only get worse under this administration.

The hopelessness of indefinite detention – characterized by permanent separation from family and the banishment of the prospect of returning to a normal life – naturally has a deleterious effect on prisoners' well-being. Coupled with increased harassment and humiliation by camp guards, this situation is today manifesting in the supremely desperate act of protest represented in the present mass hunger strike by detainees. That this increasingly draconian reality at Guantánamo has occurred during the tenure of Barack Obama, a man who based his very election in part on a pledge to *close* the prison, is a tragic irony. It also represents a moral failure on the part of Obama's liberal supporters who excoriated George W Bush for his operation of the camp, but have remained largely acquiescent with President Obama's entrenchment and intensification of his predecessors policies.

For the men who have spent years trapped in Guantánamo and now stare into the legal abyss of permanent detention there, the policies of this administration have meant a worsening of their already fraught conditions. The case of Shaker Aamer, cleared for release in 2007, yet still languishing in Guantánamo nearly six years later, offers some clue as to why the Obama administration may be taking extraordinary measures to ensure detainees such as him remain behind bars. In the words of his lawyer, Clive Stafford Smith:

"I have known Shaker for some time; because he is so eloquent and outspoken about the injustices of Guantánamo, he is very definitely viewed as a threat by the US. Not in the sense of being an extremist, but in the sense of being someone who can rather eloquently criticize the nightmare that happened there."

For those who have experienced and borne witness to beatings, torture, and even death at Guantánamo Bay over the past decade, Barack Obama has ensured that the prospect of freedom will remain as remote as ever.