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Guantanamo hunger strikers ready for death: lawyer



His body ravaged and weakened by a 50-day hunger strike staged in protest at alleged mistreatment of Korans at Guantanamo jail, Abd al-Malik Abd al-Wahab has a message for his loved ones. "Tell my family if I die to forgive me," said Abd al-Wahab, a 33-year-old Yemeni national who has spent 11 years - or a third of his life - behind bars at the controversial U.S. detention facility in Cuba. Abd al-Wahab, whose comments were relayed to AFP by his lawyer, is among dozens of detainees who are staging a hunger strike at the military prison amid allegations - vehemently denied by U.S. officials - that guards improperly handled Korans during searches in February. The scale of the protest is hotly disputed by officials at the camp and rights lawyers acting for detainees. Several attorneys representing prisoners say the majority of the estimated 130 prisoners at Guantanamo's Camp 6 wing, which houses "low-value" detainees, are on hunger strike. U.S. authorities put the number of hunger strikers at 37, a four-fold increase since the first tally released on March 11. Navy Captain Robert Durand, a spokesman for the prison, said 11 of the hunger strikers were being fed with feeding tubes, while two of those had been hospitalized for rehydration and observation. For David Remes, a lawyer representing 15 detainees, including 13 hunger strikers, the protest at the prison is "is unprecedented in its scope, in its duration, in its determination." Remes spoke to Abd al-Wahab and another prisoner he represents, Uthman Uthman (formal name: Uthman Abd al-Rahim Muhammad Uthman), for approximately an hour and a half via telephone on Friday. The lawyer was adamant that the hunger strikers are prepared to die unless there are changes to the protocols that govern how Korans are handled at the jail. Uthman has lost more than 20 kilograms (44 pounds) since starting the strike. "It's the ultimate expression of desperation," said Remes. "It's a matter of personal autonomy... the detainees are determined to take it all the way unless the military stops searching their Korans." Uthman, meanwhile, said prisoners at Guantanamo had little faith in the camp's new commander and did not trust International Committee of the Red Cross monitors who had visited them. "Nobody would talk to them," Uthman was quoted as saying by Remes. Abd al-Wahab, meanwhile, told Remes that detainees feel "death is with them, death is coming to them" after more than seven weeks on hunger strike. He insisted that the only way a resolution can be found is if U.S. authorities change the procedures for handling Korans. "I don't want them to insult it (the Koran) even though I need it to live," he told his lawyer. "We want a clear rule. No way we can hide anything in the Koran even if we wanted because the religion prohibits it." Guantanamo officials have pointedly rejected suggestions that copies of the Koran have been mistreated at any time. In comments earlier this month, Durand said that there had been no incidents of desecration of the Koran by guards or translators, during a routine search for contraband. "No JTF-Guantanamo guard touches any detainee's Koran at any time. The Koran is treated with the utmost respect," he said. "We take allegations of Koran abuse seriously, and we also watch for manufactured claim of Koran abuse by detainees or outsiders."