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Force feeding hunger strikers breaches law, U.N. warns



Force-feeding hunger strikers is a breach of international law, the UN's human rights office said Wednesday, as US authorities tried to stem a protest by inmates at the controversial Guantanamo Bay jail. "If it's perceived as torture or inhuman treatment -- and it's the case, it's painful -- then it is prohibited by international law," Rupert Coville, spokesman for the UN high commissioner for human rights, told AFP. Out of 166 inmates held at the prison at the remote US naval base in southeastern Cuba, 100 are on hunger strike, according to the latest tally from military officers. And of those, 21 detainees are being fed through nasal tubes. Coville explained that the UN bases its stance on that of the World Medical Association, a 102-nation body whose members include the United States, which is a watchdog for ethics in healthcare. In 1991 the WMA said that forcible feeding is "never ethically acceptable." "Even if intended to benefit, feeding accompanied with threats, coercion, force or use of physical restraints is a form of inhuman and degrading treatment. Equally unacceptable is the force feeding of some detainees in order to intimidate or coerce other hunger strikers to stop fasting," it said. That WMA ruling followed a 1975 declaration that artificial feeding methods should never be used without a prisoner's permission, and that a prisoner had the right to refuse all food if a physician considered the individual capable of "unimpaired and rational judgment" about the consequences. Artificial feeding can be used if a prisoner agrees to it or if the detainee is ruled unable to make a competent decision and left no unpressured advance instructions refusing it, according to the WMA. The hunger strike, which is now into its 12th week, has upped the pressure on Washington to shut what President Barack Obama has called a legal "no man's land." On Tuesday, Obama vowed to renew a push to close the prison, saying he did not want any inmates to die and urging Congress to help him find a long-term solution that would allow for prosecuting terror suspects while shuttering Guantanamo. The inmates are protesting their indefinite detention without charges or trials at the facility, which was set up by his predecessor, George W. Bush, to hold those captured in Afghanistan and elsewhere after the attacks of September 11, 2001.