

Officials say transfer of detainees not imminent

by Paul M. Krawzak and Rick Roger

WASHINGTON - Government officials said Friday there is no immediate prospect of transferring hundreds of accused terrorist detainees at Guantanamo Bay to military prisons near San Diego or elsewhere in the United States.

Rep. Duncan Hunter, R-Calif., who opposes closing the U.S. base in Cuba, raised the issue Thursday when he released a list of 17 military prisons - including brigades at Camp Pendleton and Miramar - that he said House Democrats identified as "potential relocation points for terror suspects."

Hunter said "thousands of American civilians" could become endangered if detainees who were transferred to the prisons escaped or shared their skills with other inmates, or the prisons became terrorist targets.

But congressional aides and others said as far as they know, there are no plans to close Guantanamo or transfer its 385 prisoners to domestic facilities.

President Bush has expressed a willingness to close Guantanamo, which has become a lightning rod for criticism of the United States. But on Thursday, Defense Secretary Robert Gates, who also favors closing it, expressed doubts the military prison system "provides the capacity to keep" its detainees incarcerated.

Officials at Camp Pendleton said they have no indication the brigade is being considered to hold terrorists, which they said would require significant modification of the facility, reorganization, training and additional funding.

"Headquarters Marine Corps has not officially tasked the Camp Pendleton brigade, nor has anyone on this installation been told about any possible considerations relating to Guantanamo Bay detainees," Marine 2nd Lt. Curtis Williamson, a Camp Pendleton spokesman, said.

No contingency plans have been made for the transfer of prisoners if Guantanamo closed, Pentagon officials said Friday.

"While some have called for the closure of Guantanamo, none (has) put forth a viable option to handle these dangerous men and prevent their return to terrorism," Navy Lt. Cmdr. Chito Pepler, a Pentagon spokesman, said.

Congressional aides said the debate over Guantanamo has just begun.

"It's too early to know what's going to happen," said Loren Dealy, spokeswoman for House Armed Services Committee Chairman Ike Skelton, D-Mo. Skelton has not taken a position on whether Guantanamo should be closed.

Josh Holly, a spokesman for Hunter, contends it's significant the House Armed Services Committee was presented with a list of military prisons that could potentially be used to hold detainees during the committee's first hearing on closing Guantanamo Thursday.

"This is the first time we have seen a list that has been produced," he said. According to an internal committee memo, the chart of prisons is based on 2003 figures put together for the Base Closure and Realignment Commission.

The chart shows the 17 prisons having the capacity to hold 424 more prisoners than the 2,141 who were incarcerated at the time.

It also indicates the prisons' capacity could be expanded to handle an additional 410 prisoners.

Camp Pendleton had 164 prisoners but could handle 185 in 2003, according to the chart. Miramar had 320 but could handle 374, it indicated.

The Camp Pendleton brig is not filled to capacity, a spokesman said Friday. But he added the prison is being downsized and is not designed for terrorists or enemy detainees.

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