

# Human Rights Watch

## Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/04/10/joint-letter-sec-chuck-hagel-guantanamo-hunger-strikes-and-force-feeding>

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April 10, 2014

The Honorable Chuck Hagel

Secretary

United States Department of Defense

1000 Defense Pentagon

Washington, DC 20301-1000

Dear Mr. Secretary,

The undersigned civil liberties, human rights, and religious organizations wrote to you on December 19, 2013 to express serious concerns over two developments at the Guantanamo Bay detention facility (that letter is attached). Shortly before writing, we learned that protocols for managing hunger strikes at Guantanamo had been revised, but the military refused to disclose the changes. We also learned that US Southern Command had decided to stop providing the public with information on the number of detainees engaged in hunger strikes.

Unfortunately, basic information about detainees currently on hunger strike at Guantanamo, including critical details about how the military manages them, remains cloaked in secrecy. The prospect that the number of detainees on hunger strike has increased since we last wrote makes transparency even more urgent.<sup>[1]</sup>

The March 10, 2014 release of a Defense Department document titled Medical Management of Detainees with Weight Loss raises additional concerns. Though heavily redacted and replete with inappropriate euphemisms, the document appears to contain the governing protocol for managing hunger strikes at Guantanamo (or long-term religious fast[s], as JTF-GTMO now labels them). Much of the information needed to assess thoroughly whether the revised protocol ameliorates any of our moral, ethical or legal concerns remains secret. However, the disclosed portions of the protocol coupled with [recent allegations](#) that detainees continue to be force-fed in a manner which amounts to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment suggest that serious violations of medical ethics, medical care standards and human rights obligations could be commonplace. For example:

The [World Medical Association](#), the [American Medical Association](#), the [International Committee of the Red Cross](#), the [Inter American Commission on Human Rights](#), and [United Nations Special Rapporteurs on Torture, on Human Rights and Counter-Terrorism, and on Health](#), all oppose force-feeding a practice that appears to continue at Guantanamo. It is time to lift the veil of secrecy around hunger strikes, and to provide the public with the information that it needs and deserves to understand what is happening and to hold its government accountable. To that end, we reiterate our request that you order JTF-GTMO to resume providing basic information on the numbers of detainees on hunger strike, including how many have been approved for force-feeding and how many have been hospitalized. We further urge you to make public a fully unredacted copy of the current hunger strike management protocol.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,

<sup>[1]</sup>According to recent [comments](#) by Rear Admiral Richard Butler, the number of detainees on hunger strike and approved for force-feeding may have risen from 15 (the number reported on Dec. 2, 2013 the last day Guantnamos public relations team disclosed figures) to as many as a couple dozen.

[2] Those safeguards include: a requirement that the facility warden notify a judge if an inmate is to be fed involuntarily, including relevant background and an explanation for why involuntary feeding is necessary; an individualized assessment of how involuntary feeding is to be administered; and a requirement that all involuntary feedings are videotaped. We do not suggest that implementation of those safeguards at Guantnamo would be sufficient to render JTF-GTMOs hunger strike management protocol consistent with international law.

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