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Navy Nurse Refuses to Torture Guantanamo Prisoner

By Helen Schietinger and Jeremy Varon
July 16, 2014 | 22:57EST

These are the words of a Navy nurse assigned to force-feed prisoners who are hunger striking at Guantanamo Bay prison:

I refuse to participate in this criminal act.

Abu Wael Dhiab, one of the hunger strikers, witnessed the nurses courageous stand and reported it to his lawyer. Dhiab, as [quoted through his attorney](#), described the nurse as very compassionate in his treatment of detainees over the prior months. Initially, he did carry out his orders, says Dhiab. He decided he could not do it anymore.

The nurses refusal is an extraordinary act of conscience. It speaks to the brutality of forced-feeding, which the hunger strikers describe as torture and medical and human rights bodies have denounced. It affirms the ethical obligations of medical professionals, which prohibit forced-feeding. And it underscores the broader criminality of Guantanamo, where men are held indefinitely without charge or trial and further brutalized when they protest.

Witness Against Torture praises the heroic act of the Guantanamo nurse, who should not suffer disciplinary consequences for his principled stand. We hope his act inspires other staff at Guantanamo to refuse to execute camp orders. Most of all, we hope the nurses resistance further awakens the American people and President Obama to the barbarity of Guantanamo and hastens the closure of the prison.

Refusing food is among the only means the detained men have to protest their indefinite detention and abusive treatment. Such treatment includes the [defilement of the Quran, genital and body cavity searches](#) before and after leaving their cells, being beaten by [Forcible Cell Extraction](#) teams when taken from cells, and being held in solitary confinement for months and even years.

Rather than addressing these grievances, President Obama has allowed the continuation of forced-feeding [a tactic](#) the military admits is intended to break the 18-month-long hunger strike. The procedure, while couched in secrecy, is shockingly violent compared to medically warranted tube-feeding.

As described in [letters from detainee Emad Hassan](#), the hunger striker is strapped into a restraining chair, often tightly around the abdomen. A tube larger than one used for standard nasogastric tube-feeding is forced through delicate nasal passages, down the throat, and into the victims stomach. Nutritional supplement, at times containing medication or water, is injected rapidly in large quantities into the stomach, sometimes causing nausea, vomiting, and abdominal pain. The tube is then removed and is sometimes yanked quickly from the nose, causing trauma in the nasal passages.

Dhiabs lawyers are challenging his forced-feeding in federal court. In a related lawsuit, Judge Gladys Kessler granted the disclosure of videotapes of forced-feeding sessions to attorneys. One attorney described the footage as [so grim that I had trouble sleeping](#). Media groups are asking a judge to release the videos to the public, which absolutely should happen. Regardless of the ruling on the tapes,

President Obama should view them and ask himself if forced-feeding is something he or the United States can condone.

The nurse refusing to obey the order to force-feed prisoners displayed great courage and integrity. Nonetheless, it is astounding that it has taken until now for a medical professional to refuse to engage in forced-feeding. The professional code of ethics directs all nurses to practice with compassion and respect for the inherent dignity, worth and uniqueness of every individual and protect the health, safety, and rights of the patient. (American Nurses Association Code of Ethics, 2001) The World Medical Association insists that, Forcible feeding is never ethically acceptable. Even if intended to benefit, feeding accompanied by threats, coercion, force or use of physical restraints is a form of inhuman and degrading treatment. (WMA Declaration of Malta on Hunger Strikers, 2006). In a letter to the Pentagon, the American Medical Association stated, the forced feeding of detainees violates core ethical values of the medical profession. (J. Lazarus, AMA President, 4/25/2013)

The military defends forced-feeding as a humanitarian measure to save the lives of detainees. The men, however, are crying out against their abusive treatment by prison staff and their unjust detention. They don't have to be force-fed to be kept alive. The solution is for the Obama administration to: 1) order the military to immediately end forced-feeding and cease and desist from all abuse of the prisoners in its custody 2) release without delay all the men who have been cleared for transfer by the US government 3) and finally close Guantanamo, ensuring human rights and proper due process for all the men detained there.

Abu Wael Dhiab is among the six prisoners whom Secretary of Defense [Chuck Hagel just recently designated for transfer to Uruguay](#). His release would mean the dismissal of his lawsuit seeking an end to his forced-feeding. But the forced-feeding of others and lawsuits challenging their treatment will continue, as will the immoral and illegal detention of men at Guantanamo. We owe it to Mr. Dhiab, to those who continue to suffer at Guantanamo, and the men who have died there to close Guantanamo and newly respect the human rights and dignity of all.