

Pentagon fires Guantanamo prison commander for calling attention to US crimes

By Bill Van Auken
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The Pentagon has announced the abrupt firing of the commander of the infamous US prison camp at the Guantanamo Bay Naval Base in Cuba.

In a statement released Sunday, the US Southern Command (SOUTHCOM), which oversees the extra-legal detention center, claimed that Rear Adm. John C. Ring, the camp commandant, had been relieved of his command because of a “loss of confidence in his ability” to lead. The facility has a staff of 1,800 troops and civilian personnel deployed to continue the imprisonment of 40 remaining detainees.

The dismissal comes just weeks before Ring was to complete his tour as the 18th commander of the prison camp, which was opened in 2002 as part of the “war on terror” launched under the administration of George W. Bush. The timing suggests retaliation by the top brass over what it sees as the rear admiral’s overly frank statements to the media.

Last December, he gave an interview at one of Guantanamo’s detention centers to NBC News in which he complained about the deterioration of the camp facilities and the failure of Congress to appropriate funds for their replacement or repair. He also warned that the aging of the prisoners could soon turn the notorious site of torture, rendition and illegal detention into something resembling a nursing home.

Ring had estimated last year that \$69 million was needed to replace the most dilapidated of the camp’s facilities, which houses the 15 so-called “high-value detainees” who were transferred to Guantanamo in 2006–2007 after being imprisoned and tortured at CIA “black sites” around the world.

His firing came on the same day that the *New York Times* published a lengthy article titled “Guantánamo Bay as Nursing Home: Military Envisions Hospice Care as Terrorism Suspects Age.” Written by Carol Rosenberg, who has reported from Guantanamo since 2002, previously for the *Miami Herald*, the article included extensive statements made by Ring during a recent press trip to the prison camp.

“Unless America’s policy changes, at some point we’ll be doing some sort of end of life care here,” the *Times* quoted the commander as saying. “A lot of my guys are pre-diabetic... Am I going to need dialysis down here? I don’t know. Someone’s got to tell me that. Are we going to do complex cancer care

down here? I don’t know. Someone’s got to tell me that.”

The oldest prisoner at Guantanamo is now 71, while the average age is 46. Many have been held since the facility opened in 2002, and the majority of them, 26 in all, have never been charged, much less tried for any crime.

Defense One quoted Ring as stating: “I’m sort of caught between a rock and a hard place. The Geneva Conventions’ Article III, that says that I have to give the detainees equivalent medical care that I would give to a trooper. But if a trooper got sick, I’d send him home to the United States. And so I’m stuck. Whatever I’m going to do, I have to do here.”

Any US military personnel with serious health problems are airlifted to the US Naval Hospital in Jacksonville, Florida. Laws passed by Congress, however, bar any Guantanamo detainees from being brought onto US soil for any purpose whatsoever. As a result, detainees who suffer serious medical conditions, in many cases the result of systematic torture, receive either inadequate care or none whatsoever.

The *Times* article cited the case of Abd al Hadi al Iraqi, accused of leading resistance to US troops who invaded Afghanistan. He was left untreated for degenerative disc disease and back injuries exacerbated by torture until he lost the use of his legs and became incontinent. What followed was a series of botched spinal surgeries performed in the prison camp that has left Hadi, 58, in a wheelchair and dependent upon painkillers. While medical personnel concluded that he needed complex surgery that could not be performed at the camp, the law bars his being transferred to a US military hospital.

The *Times* article also cited the case of Mustafa al Hawsawi, a Saudi man alleged to have provided assistance with travel and expenses to the 9/11 hijackers. He “has for years suffered such chronic rectal pain from being sodomized in the CIA prisons that he sits gingerly on a pillow in court, returns to his cell to recline at the first opportunity and fasts frequently to try to limit bowel movements.”

Another prisoner, an Indonesian man known as Hambali, who is accused of being a leader of the Southeast Asian Islamist group Jemaah Islamiyah, requires a knee replacement as a result of injuries suffered during torture at CIA black sites, including being continuously shackled by his ankles.

No doubt Ring's statements to the media rankled both the Trump administration and the Pentagon's senior command on two scores. First, they gave the lie to the continuous claims made that Guantanamo is needed to house the "worst of the worst," rather than an aging and infirm population, and, second, they exposed the fact that Washington is continuing to carry out war crimes against those it subjected to torture, denying them the level of medical treatment required under the Geneva Conventions.

Opened during the Bush administration, Guantanamo was kept in operation under the presidency of Barack Obama, despite his vow to shut it down. Obama codified into law the system of drumhead trials by "military commissions," which deny the accused every fundamental right a genuine court affords to a defendant under the US Constitution.

These tribunals are caught in a web of contradictions that have kept the rigged trials from moving forward. Earlier this month, the US Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit threw out more than two years of decisions by Col. Vance Spath, a military commission judge who presided over the case of Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri, accused in connection with the 2000 bombing of the warship USS Cole in the port of Aden, Yemen. The court found that Spath had a conflict of interest that he should have disclosed. During the proceedings, he had applied for and obtained a job as an immigration judge in the US Justice Department, whose officials were prosecuting the case.

Spath's rulings included the denial of a motion by al-Nashiri's defense attorneys that they be allowed to notify their client that their discussions were being bugged by the military. When the civilian lawyers withdrew from the case because of these conditions, Spath convicted the tribunal's chief defense counsel, a Marine brigadier general, of contempt for allowing them to do so, ordering him to be fined and confined to quarters, a ruling that was subsequently overturned.

Obama handed over this barbaric legacy to Trump, who vowed during his campaign to fill up the prison with "bad dudes" and reintroduce waterboarding and "worse." In January of 2018, Trump signed an order to keep Guantanamo open and vowed to continue treating captured "terrorists" as "unlawful enemy combatants" and send more of them to the Cuban prison camp.

While as yet no new detainees have been transferred to Guantanamo, the Pentagon has been ordered to draw up plans to continue the detention facility's operations for another 25 years.

It was reported this month that the Department of Homeland Security was reviewing the feasibility of sending immigrant children captured on the US southwestern border to be imprisoned at Guantanamo.

This would not be the first time that Guantanamo has been used for such a criminal purpose. In 1991, some 12,500 Haitians fleeing the repression that followed the 1991 coup that

overthrew the elected government of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide were imprisoned there. The island's refugee prison camps swelled to 50,000 by 1994 under the Clinton administration. The policy was introduced by then-Attorney General William Barr, who now holds the same post under Trump.

Among the early investigative exposures carried out by WikiLeaks and its founder Julian Assange in 2007 was the publication of the "Standard Operating Procedures for Camp Delta," outlining official US policy at the Guantanamo Bay prison. The document exposed the fact that Washington was preventing the Red Cross from accessing some of the prisoners, a claim Washington had previously denied.

Assange is now being held in Belmarsh prison, dubbed "the UK's Guantanamo," facing extradition to the US and into the clutches of the war criminals he has done so much to expose. Chelsea Manning, the courageous US Army whistleblower who provided a trove of evidence to WikiLeaks in 2010 exposing US war crimes, is being subjected to punitive imprisonment for refusing to testify before a grand jury created to fabricate criminal charges against Assange.

Right-wing politicians and government officials have described Assange as a "terrorist" and an "enemy combatant," and WikiLeaks as a "hostile non-state intelligence agency."

The order to keep Guantanamo open for another quarter of a century is directed not merely at preparing space for Al Qaeda-connected fighters captured overseas. It is also intended to maintain a prison beyond the reach of any constitutional rights for those--both at home and abroad--accused of exposing the crimes of the US government and opposing the interests of the ruling capitalist oligarchy.

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