

By Andy Worthington

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Four months ago, on May 23, President Obama delivered [a major speech](#) on national security issues, in which he promised to resume releasing cleared prisoners from Guantánamo. At the time, of the remaining 166 prisoners, 86 had been [cleared for release](#) in January 2010 by an inter-agency task force of officials from the major government departments and the intelligence agencies, which the president had established shortly after taking office in January 2009.

These men were still held for a variety of reasons. One reason was [the onerous restrictions imposed by Congress](#), where lawmakers sought to prevent the release of prisoners under any circumstances, insisting that the defense secretary would have to certify that any prisoner he sought to release would be unable to engage in terrorism in the future. Another reason was [a ban on releasing cleared Yemeni prisoners](#), who comprise 56 of those cleared for release but still held, which President Obama imposed in January 2010, after a failed airline bomb plot that was hatched in Yemen.

On May 23, while promising to resume releasing prisoners, President Obama also dropped his ban on releasing any of the cleared Yemenis, but since then no Yemenis have been freed, and just two prisoners out of the 86 — both Algerians — [have been released](#), after the administration made the necessary certifications to Congress.

The great irony, four months since President Obama's promise to resume releasing prisoners, is that the president only made this promise because he had been provoked into action by the prisoners themselves. In February, in despair at ever being released, or being granted any form of recognizable justice, the majority of the prisoners embarked on a prison-wide hunger strike, which drew the attention of the world's media, the outrage of NGOs and medical professionals, and public criticism of the prison's ongoing existence by high-level Democrats — in particular, [Sen. Carl Levin](#), the chair of the Senate Armed Services Committee.

And yet, despite this, and despite the fact that only two prisoners have been released, and 84 cleared men still await release, the news from the Pentagon this week is that the hunger strike is "largely over," as the [New York Times](#) described it yesterday.

A Pentagon spokesman, Lt. Col. Samuel House, said that the military "would no longer issue daily updates on the number of inmates participating in the protest, eligible for force-feeding or hospitalized, as had been its practice over the past few months, because the participation has fallen away from its peak two months ago," as the *Times* put it.

Lt. Col. House said, "Following July 10, 2013, the number of hunger strikers has dropped significantly, and we believe today's numbers represent those who wish to continue to strike." Since September 11, the number of prisoners taking part in the hunger strike has been steady at 19 individuals. This is still considerably more than the seven or so who were long-term hunger strikers when the prison-wide hunger strike began in February, but it is considerably less than the 106 that the military conceded were taking part in the hunger strike from June 28 to July 10.

Noticeably, however, 18 of these 19 men are being force-fed, a process that medical professionals regard as unacceptable, as they have pointed out on several occasions in the last six months.

In April, the American Medical Association (AMA) [wrote a letter to the Pentagon](#) stating that "force feeding of detainees violates core ethical values of the medical profession," and in June, in an editorial in the [New England Journal of Medicine](#), three medical professors wrote, "Military physicians should refuse to participate in any act that unambiguously violates medical ethics," adding, "Military physicians who refuse to follow orders that violate medical ethics should be actively and strongly supported."

Shortly after this editorial was published, 153 doctors from the US and around the world condemned the force-feeding of hunger strikers at Guantánamo in [a letter to President Obama](#) that was published in the [Lancet](#), and in July the British Medical Association (BMA)

[followed suit](#)

, writing to President Obama “urging him to immediately suspend the role of doctors and nurses in force-feeding prisoners held at Guantánamo Bay and to launch an inquiry into how the ‘unjustifiable’ practice ha[d] been allowed to develop.”

Here at “Close Guantánamo,” we believe that focusing on the hunger strike being “largely over” deflects attention from the ongoing violation of the core ethical values of the medical profession that is involved in force-feeding prisoners, and we note that it remains an outrage no matter how many or how few men are being subjected, twice a day, to having tubes inserted up their noses and into their stomachs, and force-fed liquid nutrient.

We also believe that nothing should be allowed to deflect from the importance of releasing cleared prisoners, and urge President Obama to do much more than he has done so far. We demand the release of the 84 cleared prisoners, who include 56 Yemenis and 28 men from other countries, and we insist that, if third countries cannot be found for some of those men who face persecution in their own countries, they should be given new homes in the United States.

If you agree with our demands, please contact the White House and the Department of Defense, as outlined below.

What you can do now

Call the White House and ask President Obama to release all the men cleared for release. Call 202-456-1111 or 202-456-1414 or [submit a comment online](#) .

Call the Department of Defense and ask Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel to issue certifications for other cleared prisoners: 703-571-3343.