

The recent suicide of three inmates at the US military prison camp at Guantánamo Bay brought a number of issues into sharp focus (however briefly). It forced global public opinion to take a good look at the ugly business that is being conducted - highly opaquely - within the auspices of that camp. It forced the authorities running the prison to face the fact that their actions have consequences. And above all, it reminded us that in the 21st century, there is no justification for the legal black hole that is Guantánamo Bay.

The fact that terrorism and militancy are real issues, and must be dealt with in practical terms, is not likely to be denied by any reasonable person. The issue is, of course, *how* these matters should be dealt with. And as any scientific problem-solving approach will confirm, treating the symptoms without treating the cause is unlikely to be successful. If, to make things worse, the symptoms are suppressed by means which are debatably as bad as the disease itself, the chances of success plummet even further...

The conditions under which inmates have been held at Guantánamo, and the treatment that they have received at the hands of their captors, might reasonably be termed less than satisfactory. Under the circumstances, the suicides cannot have come as a surprise, no matter what is said publicly about it. What is far more surprising is that it took this long to happen.

After all, this particular prison camp has experienced a series of difficulties since it first opened in late 2001. In early 2002, doctors began force-feeding two detainees on hunger strike for nearly a month. This method of protest was to re-emerge in force a few years later.

It has since been reported that the method of force-feeding used at the camp involved "restraint chairs", and that the process was made deliberately uncomfortable - some say, painful - to deter prisoners from undertaking hunger strikes. Despite this, to date, dozens of prisoners have done so.

By April 2003, the number of suicide attempts had already reached 24, and a few months later in August of the same year, 23 detainees staged an eight day protest, trying to hang or strangle themselves. By the end of 2003, a total of 350 incidents of "self-

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harm" (an understatement perhaps, and one that covers a multitude of sins!) had been recorded in that year, including 120 "hanging gestures" (perhaps that should read "attempted hangings" - talk about euphemisms!).

2005 saw a mass hunger strike that lasted several months. At its height, the strike involved 131 detainees; it ended with the introduction of the dreaded "restraint chairs" and the policy of force-feeding. Last month, a group of detainees attacked guards at the camp a day after a failed suicide attempt by two prisoners using anti-anxiety drugs that they had hoarded (UK Independent).

By 2003, the International Committee of the Red Cross, the only independent organisation granted access to the prisoners, had already warned that many faced severe mental health issues. It stated that the nature of their imprisonment and interrogation, which included humiliating acts, solitary confinement, temperature extremes and the use of force positions, was "a form of torture".

The Red Cross was not alone in its criticisms. Campaigners have long accused the Bush administration of ignoring mounting - and somewhat predictable - mental health problems among prisoners.

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