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www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

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Al Jazeera

US unveils extended Bagram prison

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Journalists have been permitted to inspect newly refurbished facilities at Bagram airbase in Afghanistan, the largest US military hub in the region and home to a controversial prison.

Al Jazeera's correspondent James Bays, who was among those who inspected the internment facilities on Sunday, said Bagram, unlike its Guantanamo counterpart, was clearly not going to be shut down soon.



Al Jazeera was not permitted to ask detainees what they thought of the new facilities [AFP]

"The new prison wing cost some \$60 million to build ... and is meant to be part of a new era of openness and transparency," Bays said.

"But we were not shown the detainees themselves. And human-rights lawyers say that while the environment for the prisoners may be changing, their legal situation is not ... not having been charged. Nor has any civilian lawyer ever been allowed inside."

Bays said the new prison could hold up to 1,000 detainees, but was at present holding around 700 inmates, including 30 foreign prisoners.

However, General Mark Martins, who runs detention operations at the airbase, said the US military was improving its treatment of detainees and had learnt many lessons since occupying the country in 2001.

"Detention, if not done properly, can actually harm the effort. We are a learning organisation ... we believe transparency is certainly going to help the effort, and increase the credibility of the whole process," Martins said.

Base expansion

Bagram Air Field is the largest US military hub in Afghanistan. Home to some 24,000 military personnel and civilian contractors.

Tens of millions of dollars continue to be spent on expanding and upgrading facilities - turning Bagram into a town spread over some 5,000 acres.

The actual air field part of the complex is already handling 400 tonnes of cargo and 1,000 passengers daily, according to Air Force spokesman Captain David Faggard.

And it is continuing to grow to keep up with the requirements of an escalating war and troop increases.

Among new options being considered in Washington is regional commander General Stanley McChrystal's request to bring an additional 40,000 troops to Afghanistan.

But even with current troop levels - 65,000 US troops and about 40,000 from allied countries - Bagram already is bursting at the seams, Bays said.

Plans are under way to build a new, \$22 million passenger terminal and a new cargo yard costing \$9 million. To increase cargo capacity, a new parking ramp supporting the world's largest aircraft is to be completed in early 2010.

Bagram was previously a major Soviet base during Moscow's 1979-89 occupation of Afghanistan, providing air support to Soviet and Afghan forces fighting the mujahedin.

Bagram lies in Parwan, a relatively quiet province. The Taliban is not believed to have a significant presence in the province.

But the base is susceptible to rocket and mortar attacks. In 2009, Taliban launched more than a dozen attacks on the base, killing four and wounding at least 12, according to Colonel Mike Brady, a military spokesman.