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## Illinois prison could host military trials of detainees

Thomson Correctional Center is a top option to house Guantanamo transfers. The Obama administration says the Defense Department could hold proceedings against terrorism suspects at the rural site.



"We should not invite Al Qaeda to make Illinois its No. 1 target," U.S. Rep. Mark Steven Kirk (R-Ill.) wrote to President Obama, asking him to remove the rural prison from the list of possible sites for housing detainees now at Guantanamo. (Charles Rex Arbogast / Associated Press / November 16, 2009)

By Christi Parsons and Julian Barnes  
November 17, 2009

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Reporting from Washington - In addition to housing foreign detainees, an Illinois state prison could become a site for military trials of those charged with acts of terrorism, an administration official acknowledged Monday.

As the Obama administration works to identify a detention facility for prisoners transferred from the U.S. military prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, federal officials also are considering sites to hold military commission trials for at least some of the suspects.

The moves are part of administration plans to close Guantanamo and begin prosecutions. The Thomson Correctional Center was named last week as a leading option for housing detainees outside of Guantanamo.

Critics of the plan to house detainees at Thomson, in northwest Illinois, say it could mean that prisoners would be shuttled as far as Chicago, 150 miles east, to face trials in federal district court, causing potential security threats.

However, a number of the detainees are likely to face trial not in federal court, but before military tribunals. The official said Monday that the administration is not yet at the stage yet of deciding whether or how to locate tribunals at Thomson, but that tribunals could be held "at or near" detention centers where prisoners are being held.

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The idea is part of a delicate series of discussions over Guantanamo. Many of the detainees have been approved for transfer to other countries, and a handful will be moved directly to New York to stand trial.

But some of the more than 200 detainees could move to a Defense Department-run center somewhere in the U.S., possibly the nearly empty Thomson, near the Illinois-Iowa border.

Such centers are likely to be magnets for international attention as legal observers and news organizations arrive to view the trials and the Obama administration's approach to detention questions.

But U.S. Rep. Mark Steven Kirk, a Republican from the northern Chicago suburbs, said he worries that trials of detainees housed at a location such as Thomson would necessitate federal court trials in district courts in Rockford or Chicago, exposing the area to security risks.

"As home to America's tallest building, we should not invite Al Qaeda to make Illinois its No. 1 target," Kirk wrote in a recent letter to President Obama, asking him to take Thomson off the list of possible sites.

Obama administration officials said the location of the detention center would not dictate the site of federal court

trials, however.

"Establishing the facility at Thomson would have no impact on where the Justice Department decides to prosecute detainees who will go on trial in federal courts," the administration official said.

The government has wide latitude in choosing where to prosecute such cases, and in the past has preferred New York and Virginia.

But as for military commissions, the Defense Department has discretion for choosing sites. So far, all of the military commission proceedings have been at the Guantanamo Naval Base, at a facility not far from the prison.

There is no requirement to hold the military commission trials in the same location as the detention center, but it would make it easier for military officials.

Wherever the trials are held, the government would have to build a secure courtroom, one allowing outside groups to observe and enabling prosecutors to present classified evidence.

Charles Stimson, a former Pentagon official in the George W. Bush administration, said the Thomson facility might work best if it is used only for foreign detainees and not for regular prisoners.

"The current thinking is it will be one-stop shopping," said Stimson, a legal scholar at the Heritage Foundation in Washington.

Stimson said that even if Thomson was approved as a detention site, it would take months to get the prison ready.

"It is not shovel ready. It will be a year or more until it's ready," Stimson said. "Guantanamo will be open next year."

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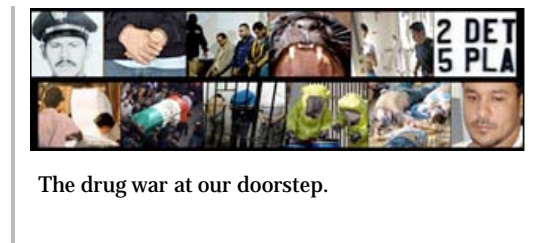
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