

January 23, 2009 - Murtha: Detainees Can be Held in America

Associated Press

www.ap.org

Murtha: Detainees can be held in America

By Daniel Nephin

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JOHNSTOWN - Rep. John Murtha's contention that Guantanamo detainees could be safely housed in U.S. prisons, including in his Western Pennsylvania district, met little resistance from his constituents.

But a fellow congressman disagreed and questioned whether placing "known terrorists" anywhere in the country was a wise idea.

Murtha, in a Fox News interview Wednesday, said the suspected terrorists would be "no more dangerous in my district than in Guantanamo." The congressman said in the interview there was "no reason not to put 'em in prisons in the United States and handle them the way they would handle any other prisoners."

There isn't a federal prison in Murtha's district, although the Federal Correctional Institution-Loretto, a low-security prison, is nearby.

A spokesman for the Democratic congressman said he couldn't say if that facility would be suitable or if another facility could be used because nothing has been proposed.

"Guantanamo has been a sore on America's image abroad, and the point Congressman Murtha is making is that we have to relocate these detainees to either their respective foreign country or to a secure maximum security prison in the U.S.," spokesman Matt Mazonkey said.

On Thursday, many people in Johnstown agreed with Murtha. None of those asked expressed security concerns, while some saw it as a possible economic boost.

"If there is space with in the district to do so, then I say fine," said Larry Stiles, a Vietnam veteran and political consultant. "We've got employment issues. People are out of work, and prison facilities generally help with providing a decrease in unemployment. If we can do it, then we should definitely investigate the possibility."

Anthony "A.J." Truilizio, 74, a retired children's rehabilitation center worker, and Don Verbano, 77, a retired insurance salesman, had been discussing the idea over lunch, and agreed it was a good one - especially if it provides jobs.

"If they build one (a prison), that would mean more work for people here," Truilizio said.

Elaine Karashowsky, an administrative supervisor who works in Johnstown, wondered about overcrowding.

"It's just, do we have room for them?" she said.

One of Murtha's colleagues disagreed with the idea.

"I know for certain constituents in my district do not want known terrorists brought to their communities, or neighboring communities for that matter," Rep. Joe Pitts, R-Pa., who represents Lancaster and the surrounding area, said in a statement. "There is no good reason to willingly bring these dangerous men into the United States. I don't want them in Pennsylvania, or anywhere in the United States for that matter."

On Thursday, President Barack Obama ordered Guantanamo be closed, a decision Murtha praised.

At least three military prisons - in Fort Leavenworth, Kan., Camp Pendleton, Calif., and Charleston, S.C. - could house some of the Guantanamo detainees, an administration official said. Also under consideration, the official said, is the Supermax prison Florence, Colo., which houses convicted Sept. 11 conspirator Zacarias Moussaoui and Olympic bomber Eric Rudolph.

An estimated 245 men are held at the U.S. naval base in Cuba. They are believed to be al-Qaida, Taliban or other foreign fighters who pose a threat to the United States.

