

January 24, 2009 - Murtha: Put Gitmo Captives in Prisons

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By Sadie Gurman and Dennis B. Roddy, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

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Rep. John Murtha believes the United States is fully capable of housing Guantanamo captives in its maximum-security prisons, his spokesman said yesterday, responding to criticism that the congressman's willingness to see detainees moved to his district would jeopardize public safety.

In a Wednesday interview on Fox News, Mr. Murtha, who praised President Barack Obama's decision to close the military detention facility, said the suspected terrorists would be "no more dangerous in my district than in Guantanamo," and that 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."

The controversial remarks sparked questions about whether holding the inmates anywhere on U.S. soil is safe.

"Mr. Murtha was saying that there is no reason to not put these detainees in maximum-security prisons in the United States and handle them the way we would handle other prisoners," spokesman Matthew Mazonkey said on behalf of Mr. Murtha, who has avoided media interviews since he appeared on Fox. "Guantanamo has been a sore on America's image abroad and we have to relocate these detainees to either their respective foreign country or to federal maximum-security prisons in the U.S."

Mr. Mazonkey yesterday also issued a list of other dangerous federal prisoners as a comparison.

The list included convicted Unabomber Theodore Kaczynski, several right-wing extremists including Olympic Park bomber Eric Rudolph, and five Islamic terrorists, including several tied to the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center, Zacarias Moussaoui, convicted of being part of the 9/11

attacks and one listed as a conspirator in the 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam.

But some people said they don't want to see Guantanamo's terror suspects brought to their communities.

Diane Gramley, president of the American Family Association of Pennsylvania, called such a plan "a dumb idea."

Moving the detainees to the country would be dangerous, she said, because "there's the very real possibility that these terrorists will influence the prisoners," or escape.

"It's inconceivable that [Mr. Murtha] is equating terrorists who hate Americans, who hate the American way of life, that he says they are no different than the common criminal," she said.

"He has no concept of the hate these individuals have for us. To allow them to come over here and live practically in our backyards is inconceivable."

Rep. Gary Haluska, D-Patton, said he had no problem with Mr. Murtha's suggestion.

"There's no difference between them or any other prisoner once they're incarcerated. There are lots of people just as bad as these people in prisons today," he said.

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

In addition to most of Cambria County, Murtha's 12th District comprises portions of Somerset, Indiana, Westmoreland, Allegheny, Washington and Fayette counties and all of Greene County in the state's southwestern corner.

Pennsylvania's Department of Corrections oversees 27 prisons, including three maximum-security facilities: Greene, Fayette and Graterford in Montgomery County.

Press Secretary Susan McNaughton said the department hasn't

received any requests from Mr. Murtha's office about housing Guantanamo detainees.

It could be difficult for the department to accommodate any such requests. State prisons held 49,307 inmates at the end of last month, putting the system at 113.7 percent of its capacity.

"We're crowded," Ms. McNaughton said.

Mr. Murtha praised the closure of the Guantanamo facility, which he said "has cast a dark shadow over two centuries of America's moral leadership in the world."