

Guantánamo Bay Prepares for President Trump's Migrant Surge

About 300 servicemembers have arrived in recent days as the base faces its most drastic changes since the Pentagon opened a prison there after the Sept. 11 attacks.



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By **Carol Rosenberg** and **Eric Schmitt**

Reporting from Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, and Washington

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About 300 servicemembers have landed at Guantánamo Bay to provide security and begin setting up at a new tent city for migrants, as officials comply with President Trump's order to prepare the Navy base for as many as 30,000 deportees.

The small base in southeast Cuba is on the verge of undergoing its most drastic change since the Pentagon opened its wartime prison there after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

The operation will require a surge of staff and goods to the isolated base, which is behind a Cuban minefield and is entirely dependent on air and sea supply missions from the United States.

Everything from pallets of bottled water and frozen food for the commissary to school supplies and government vehicles come twice a month on a barge. Fresh fruits and vegetables for the 4,200 residents come on a weekly refrigerator flight.



Fulfilling Mr. Trump's order could grow the population there tenfold because of the staff it would take to operate the encampment, which is on a unpopulated corner of the base, far from the prison as well as the commissary, school and suburban-style neighborhoods for servicemembers and their families.

In response to Mr. Trump's order, U.S. forces have already put up 50 Army green tents inside a chain-link-fence enclosure, adjacent to a barracks-style building called the Migrant Operations Center.

The first wave of about 50 Marines arrived Saturday night from Camp Lejeune, N.C. The next 50 arrived on Sunday.

The military declined to comment on its current capacity to receive the migrants or on what other provisions were inbound. The Southern Command, which has oversight of the troops assigned to the prison and the migration plan, would not say who is in charge of the operation or discuss a plan from 2017, obtained by The New York Times, for detaining the first 11,000 migrants there.

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth has said that dangerous deportees might be put in detention facilities that currently hold 15 prisoners from the war on terrorism, among them five men who are accused of plotting the Sept. 11 attacks.



A communal space for detainees at the Camp 6 detention center at Guantánamo Bay in 2019. Doug Mills/The New York Times

The 15 prisoners have been held in two prison buildings with about 275 cells. Detaining migrants at that site would presumably require moving those 15 prisoners into one of the two buildings.

But no decision has been made on whether some migrants would be housed at the wartime prison, a Defense Department official said Saturday. Separately, two people with knowledge of detention operations said the consolidation had already happened this weekend. All of them spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive security arrangements involving the prison, which are sometimes classified.

In his remarks last week, Mr. Hegseth also mentioned that about 6,000 deportees could be housed “on the golf course,” which is near the base’s McDonald’s, Irish pub and family housing.

In any case, carrying out Mr. Trump’s order would require a huge undertaking, said retired Maj. Gen. Michael R. Lehnert, a Marine who opened the prison in 2002.

General Lehnert, whose expertise as a Marine was in engineering, also managed security for the migrant arrivals at Guantánamo in the 1990s, when tens of thousands of Cubans and Haitians lived in tent cities around the base.

At its peak, he said, in May 1995, the camps held 25,000 migrants, mostly Cubans.



Cuban refugees at a makeshift camp at Guantánamo Bay in 1994. Joe Marquette/Associated Press

The base was so overwhelmed that a tent camp was even, briefly, put on the golf course. The operation was set up hastily, and it had portable latrines. As the numbers rose, the Navy closed the school and evacuated the families of servicemembers to the mainland for seven months.

The base makes its own water for everything except drinking purposes and, as it did then, would need to make much more.

The two main sites that were used back then — a vast bluff overlooking the ocean and an abandoned airfield — now have new purposes. One is a closed military zone, with the prison buildings and staff. The other has the courthouse facility called Camp Justice.

Mr. Trump's order called for expanding the Migrant Operations Center to accommodate 30,000 people. It is currently a 120-bed former barracks that in recent years housed Cubans, sometimes families, whom the U.S. Coast Guard found at sea trying to reach Florida. They were housed there until a third country agreed to receive them.

The 2017 plan, reflected in a diagram of preparations for area surrounding the Migrant Operations Center, shows six designated tent camps for more than 11,000 migrants, and a nearby spot to house 3,640 “blue forces,” a military term for forces that are friendly to the U.S. military. The largest camp could house more than 3,000 migrants.

By 2017 contractors had already built crude summer-camp-style showers and toilet houses in cinder-block buildings on the site.

In the 1990s, General Lehnert said, each tent encampment contained 1,500 migrants and was guarded by 200 troops, either soldiers or Marines. And that was just for basic security. The 1990s operation, known as Sea Signal, also had medical, logistics and other support troops as well as a separate “rapid reaction force” in the event of unrest.



An image obtained by The New York Times shows Army tents that were recently installed near the Migrant Operations Center on the Leeward side of Guantánamo Bay. President Trump has ordered this site expanded to accommodate up to 30,000 migrants.

It was not known whether the Department of Homeland Security or the U.S. military would handle processing, or what role, if any, would be assigned to the International Organization for Migration, which has an office on the base. Nor was it clear how it would be funded.

Guantánamo is an expensive place to live and work. In 2019, the commander of detention operations estimated it cost more than \$100,000 for each guard's nine-month deployment to the facility. Those troops are provided with housing, clothing, food, health care, entertainment and transportation.

Those living at Guantánamo today, in addition to sailors and their families, include schoolteachers, Filipino and Jamaican guest workers, and the prison guard force of mostly individual soldiers serving on nine-month tours.

Mr. Hegseth did one of those tours, from June 2004 to April 2005. He was the platoon leader of 40 or so men from the New Jersey National Guard who provided perimeter security for the detention center.

But it is a much smaller operation today. Mr. Hegseth was part of a nearly 2,600-member military force that was assigned to the detention operation, which held 600 detainees on the former site of migrant camps. The airstrip was a busy place then, with resupply missions, troops, reporters, and members of Congress and the intelligence community flying in frequently.

Now the prison has a staff of 800 military and civilian contractors and no longer has a media operation.

An additional 111 military police from the New York National Guard were undergoing three weeks of training at Fort Bliss, Texas, before heading to a nine-month security mission at Guantánamo Bay.

The situation was changing so quickly that when the unit departed last month, the Army said it would provide security for the detention facility. But the Pentagon said in a statement released on Thursday that the unit would secure the Migrant Operations Center.

Carol Rosenberg reports on the wartime prison and court at Guantánamo Bay. She has been covering the topic since the first detainees were brought to the U.S. base in 2002. More about Carol Rosenberg

Eric Schmitt is a national security correspondent for The Times, focusing on U.S. military affairs and counterterrorism issues overseas, topics he has reported on for more than three decades. More about Eric Schmitt

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