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## **Ex-Guantanamo Detainees Take Their Story to US Public**

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WASHINGTON , March 20, 2006 (AFP) - Former British prisoners of the controversial US-run detention camp in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba recounted Monday their experiences for the first time directly to the US public, organizers said.

"We believe it is time for this kind of conference in the United States," said the human rights group that sponsored the event, the New York-based Center for Constitutional Rights.

"For the first time in the US we will hear from the persons most affected by the Guantanamo Bay operations -- released and exonerated detainees themselves," said CCR, which is campaigning for the rights of prisoners at Guantanamo.

About 490 men remain under indefinite detention and, after more than four years, only 10 have been formally charged. They are being tried in newly created tribunals beyond the reach of US courts or international conventions.

The US government says it has detained the prisoners at the US naval base in Guantanamo because they are linked to the terrorist network Al-Qaeda or the former Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Many were captured in the autumn of 2001 in Afghanistan or Pakistan.

"Voices of Guantanamo", a videoconference between the ex-prisoners, in London, and a public forum at George Washington University in Washington, was broadcast live on C-SPAN, a nationwide public affairs cable television network.

"The purpose of today's program is to cast sunlight on a issue that is currently in need of sunlight," Fred Lawrence, dean of the George Washington University Law School, told the assembly of students, human rights activists, lawmakers' aides and journalists.

The four freed Britons -- Shafiq Rasul, Asif Iqbal, Tarek Dergoal and Rhuhal Ahmed -- described the conditions of their detention as they sat around a table in a London law office, munching chips and drinking orange juice.

Bearded and dressed in sports attire, the young men, who had been held for two years at the camp before they were released without charge, answered questions from the American audience.

"It was a very hard time for us to go through," Rasul said.

"Basically, it is like a zoo. You are just kept in a cage 24 hours a day and the guards watch you 24 hours a day," he said.

He contended his confessions were forced because he could not bear the conditions of his detention.

"I was going crazy because I had been in isolation for three months," he said.

For Dergoal, a Briton of Moroccan origin: "There was no interrogation going on in Guantanamo. It was bunch of kids asking silly questions, making silly remarks."

"What's your favorite color?" was the kind of question asked, he said. One day a guard "sat down and opened up the Koran and smiled, making comments about the Koran," the holy book of Islam, he said.

The Guantanamo prison "is not what the Bush regime says it is," he said.

All four men insisted they had never been told at Guantanamo why they were being held. We were "never given (an) explanation why we were there," said Rasul.

Rasul, Iqbal and Ahmed are of Pakistani origin and from the English town of Tipton. Now known as the "Tipton Three," the trio are the subject of a new drama-documentary film, "The Road To Guantanamo", about their experiences.

The documentary's British directors, Michael Winterbottom and Mat Whitecross, won a Silver Bear for best director at the Berlin Film Festival in February. The film may reach US theaters this summer.

Last week the United Nations torture investigator, Manfred Nowak, urged the European Union to put pressure on the United States to close the Guantanamo prison.

"Detention of all those detainees is illegal under international human rights law," he said Thursday.