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Close Guantánamo and Disclose the Rest

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"Offensive." "Irresponsible." "Reprehensible." "Unfortunate and sad." "Absurd."

Were President Bush, Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld reacting to our concerns over torture, ill-treatment and murders in US detention centres? Were Condoleezza Rice and General Richard Myers assuring the American people that abuses being perpetrated in their name, including the use of dogs and sexual humiliation, would be stamped out and investigated?

Not quite. Instead these words were used by the Administration to attack AI's Report 2005 and divert attention from some hard truths.

Over the past three and a half years, Amnesty International has produced several detailed reports on US policies and practices on human rights in the context of the "War on Terror". The most recent, containing 164 pages of evidence and analysis, was published just weeks before the launch of the 2005 AI Report. Another published in October 2004, ran to over 200 pages. The Bush Administration failed to respond to either of these reports.

The detention camp in Guantánamo is a stain on America's reputation.

But Guantánamo is just the visible tip of an iceberg of abuse, the most notorious link in a chain of detention camps ranging from Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan to prisons in Iraq and elsewhere. Evidence of terrible abuse continues to seep out of this shadowy network.

On 8 June 2005, I wrote to President Bush to make clear our deep concern about US policies and practices, which I pointed out are inconsistent with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Geneva Convention.

The next day, in an interview on the Fox News Channel, President Bush stated, in response to a question on Guantánamo Bay camp, that "we're exploring all alternatives as to how best to do the main objective, which is to protect America."

I note President Bush's statement with interest. Guantánamo detention camp disgraces the best US values. It undermines international law. It erodes the basic principles of justice, truth and freedom in which Americans take so much pride. Its very existence is a propaganda gift to armed groups that carry out brutal acts of violence and a distraction from the need to ensure that such people are brought to proper justice.

Our challenge to the US Administration is simple. Rather than turning the Administration's firepower on an independent human rights organisation, President Bush should close the embarrassment that is Guantánamo Bay. Shut down the camp, and charge the detainees under US law in US courts or release them.

And he should disclose the rest. He should order full disclosure of US policies and practices on detention and interrogation of prisoners and support an independent investigation into abuses.

The Administration has focused its attention on our description of the notorious detention camp at Guantánamo Bay as "the gulag of our times".

As they are fully aware, this metaphor was used because to many people Guantánamo has become an iconic symbol of human rights abuse and the arbitrary misuse of state power, just as the gulag had been during the Stalinist era. This is a fact and is very different from suggesting that Guantánamo was literally a gulag or from comparing it to a Soviet gulag.

Guantánamo will now be a blemish on US history. But its impact is wider: by lowering the human rights standards, the US has weakened its own moral authority to speak out on human rights.

The USA can be a true force for good in a divided, dangerous world.

The Administration should now be prepared to reassert the fundamental principles -- justice, truth and freedom -- in which they pride themselves.