

The following text may be printed, copy/pasted, or downloaded and emailed.

Annan Says U.S. Should Close Gitmo Prison

EDITH M. LEDERER
Associated Press
February 16, 2006

UNITED NATIONS (AP) - Secretary-General Kofi Annan on Thursday said the United States should close the prison at Guantanamo Bay for terror suspects as soon as possible, backing a key conclusion of a U.N.-appointed independent panel.

White House spokesman Scott McClellan rejected the call to shut the camp, saying the military treats all detainees humanely and "these are dangerous terrorists that we're talking about."

The panel's report, released Thursday in Geneva, said the United States must close the detention facility "without further delay" because it is effectively a torture camp where prisoners have no access to justice.

Annan told reporters he didn't necessarily agree with everything in the report, but "the basic premise, that we need to be careful to have a balance between effective action against terrorism and individual liberties and civil rights, I think is valid."

He said he supported the panel's opposition to people being held "in perpetuity" without being prosecuted in a public court. This is "something that is common under every legal system," he said.

"I think sooner or later there will be a need to close the Guantanamo (camp), and I think it will be up to the government to decide, and hopefully to do it as soon as is possible," the secretary-general told reporters.

The 54-page report summarizing an investigation by five U.N. experts, accused the United States of practices that "amount to torture" and demanded detainees be allowed a fair trial or be freed. The panel, which had sought access to Guantanamo Bay since 2002, refused a U.S. offer for three experts to visit the camp in November after being told they could not interview detainees.

Annan said the report by a U.N.-appointed independent panel was not a U.N. report but one by individual experts. "So we should see it in that light," he said.

U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric said the report will be presented to the U.N. Commission of Human Rights, which appointed the panel, when it convenes on March 13 in Geneva.

Manfred Nowak, the U.N. investigator for torture who was one of the panel's experts, told The Associated Press in Geneva that the detainees at Guantanamo "should be released or brought before an independent court."

"That should not be done in Guantanamo Bay, but before ordinary U.S. courts, or courts in their countries of origin or perhaps an international tribunal," he said.

The United States should allow "a full and independent investigation" at Guantanamo and also give the United Nations access to other detention centers, including secret ones, in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere, Nowak said by telephone from his office in Vienna, Austria.

"We want to have all information about secret places of detention because whenever there is a secret place of detention, there is also a higher risk that people are subjected to torture," he said.

The United States is holding about 490 men at the military detention center. They are accused of links to Afghanistan's ousted Taliban regime or to al-Qaida, but only a handful have been charged.

The U.N. investigators said photographic evidence -- corroborated by testimony of former prisoners -- showed detainees shackled, chained and hooded. Prisoners were beaten, stripped and shaved if they resisted, they said.

The report's findings were based on interviews with former detainees, public documents, media reports, lawyers and questions answered by the U.S. government, which detailed the number of prisoners held but did not give their names or the status of charges against them.

Some of the interrogation techniques -- particularly the use of dogs, exposure to extreme temperatures, sleep deprivation and prolonged isolation -- caused extreme suffering, the report said.

"Such treatment amounts to torture, as it inflicts severe pain or suffering on the victims for the purpose of intimidation and/or punishment," the report said.

The International Committee of the Red Cross is the only independent monitoring body allowed to visit Guantanamo's detainees, but it reports its findings solely to U.S. authorities.

Legislators and journalists have been allowed in on guided tours but few are permitted to see interrogations.

Pentagon spokesman Bryan Whitman said the U.N. report "clearly suffers from their unwillingness to take us up on our offer to go down to Guantanamo to observe first-hand the operations."

McClellan, the White House spokesman, echoed Whitman, saying "it's a discredit to the U.N. when a team like this goes about rushing to report something when they haven't even looked into the facts. All they have done is look at the allegations."

Although his statement did not address specific allegations, the Pentagon has acknowledged 10 cases of abuse or mistreatment at Guantanamo, including a female interrogator climbing onto a detainee's lap and a detainee whose knees were bruised from being forced to kneel repeatedly.

In Strasbourg, France, the European Parliament condemned the treatment of prisoners at Guantanamo and renewed its calls for the detention center to be closed.

Human rights activists also supported the investigators' findings.

Amnesty International said the report was only the "tip of the iceberg."

"The United States also operates detention facilities at Bagram Airbase in Afghanistan, Abu Ghraib and elsewhere in Iraq and has been implicated in the use of secret detention facilities in other countries," an Amnesty statement said.

Many of the allegations in the report have been made before. But the document represented the first inquiry launched by the 53-nation U.N. Human Rights Commission, the world body's top rights watchdog.