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GOP Backing Bush on Guantanamo Bay Prison

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A few Republicans want the Bush administration to close the U.S. military's Guantanamo Bay prison, but the loudest GOP voices are lining up to defend a facility that one human-rights group has called a "gulag."

Lawmakers from both parties are seeking inquiries into allegations that U.S. troops mistreated foreign terrorism suspects held at the prison in Cuba. Others are calling for reforms.

Answering the critics, Vice President Dick Cheney on Monday said war-on-terror detainees would continue to be held at Guantanamo, even as the White House said all options for prison's future were on the table.

On Capitol Hill, several prominent Republicans followed the administration's lead.

Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison of Texas, the No. 4 Republican in the Senate, said the prison was "housing terrorists bent on killing Americans and destroying freedom" and "it should remain in place until it is no longer needed to help win the war on terror."

Rep. Duncan Hunter, R-Calif., who is chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, displayed for reporters Guantanamo-like prison entrees of lemon-baked fish and oven-fried chicken with rice, fruit and vegetables — "purchased for them by American taxpayers" — to illustrate conditions at the prison and to counter claims of mistreatment.

"They've never eaten better. They've never been treated better," Hunter said. "We don't beat them. We don't touch them. We've been treating people well."

Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., tried to turn the Guantanamo debate into a broader indictment of how the administration handles war-on-terror detainees. He said administration policies have "caused tremendous damage to American credibility around the world and placed our troops at greater risk."

Human-rights activists and some lawmakers — mostly Democrats — want the administration to close the prison because of the allegations of torture and abuse of detainees. The prison holds about 540 terrorism suspects, including some who have not faced charges in three years.

Amnesty International has called the prison "the gulag of our time," and former President Carter also has said it should be closed.

Over the weekend, two Republicans on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee — Sens. Mel Martinez of Florida and Sen. Chuck Hagel of Nebraska — advocated closure. Martinez said the prison was "an icon for bad stories." Hagel cited it as one reason the U.S. is "losing the image war around the world."

Other Republicans were reluctant to join them Monday, although some did say changes were needed.

"Reform it, don't close it," said Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, a GOP member of the Senate Armed Services Committee. He said the prison is dysfunctional. "It's hurting the war

effort. The image of it is as a place where there's a lack of rule and lack of procedures," he added.

GOP Sen. Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania planned a hearing Wednesday in the Judiciary Committee on the treatment of detainees at Guantanamo.. Rep. Curt Weldon, R-Pa., said Monday he also would push for hearings in the House to sort through "innuendo and rumor."

"We need to look and see whether any of the allegations being levied are real," said Weldon, the No. 2 Republican on the House Armed Services Committee.

The panel has held only one public hearing on the treatment of prisoners in the war on terror, and Rep. Ike Skelton of Missouri, the top Democrat on that committee, said he wants one to focus on Guantanamo.

In the Senate, Democrats renewed their call for an objective, outside panel to review the abuse claims.

Sen. Carl Levin of Michigan, the lead Democrat on the Senate Armed Services Committee, said "the cloud will remain whether or not Guantanamo Bay is closed" without an independent investigation.

The No. 2 Democrat on the committee, Sen. Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts, said the alleged abuse has undermined the war effort and the prison's "continued existence makes it more likely that Americans will be attacked by terrorists at home or in other nations throughout the world."

However, Kennedy said, it was crucial that Congress determines what occurred at Guantanamo before deciding to close it.

Republicans on the committee dismissed the complaints.

Sen. Jeff Sessions of Alabama called them greatly exaggerated. "We are adhering to high standards of freedom and justice," he said. "If we've got a problem let's fix it. But I can't for the life of me think that we will gain respect around the world by closing this."

Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas, said closing the prison would be a substantial victory for the global terrorism movement. Plus, he said, detainees there now would have to be relocated. "I don't know who is suggesting we move it to their state," he said.