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Howard: Australia Won't Seek Gitmo Release

MIKE CORDER
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SYDNEY, Australia (AP) - Prime Minister John Howard said Sunday an Australian being held at the Guantanamo Bay prison camp should be tried before a U.S. military tribunal on charges he helped al-Qaida fight coalition forces in Afghanistan.

Howard said his government would not seek the release of former kangaroo skinner David Hicks from the U.S. naval base in eastern Cuba.

"Our position in relation to Mr. Hicks is well known, and that is that given the nature of the allegations and given the arrangements that we have hammered out with the Americans regarding the military commission, we believe he should be tried before that military commission," Howard told reporters in Melbourne.

The prime minister would not comment on a newspaper report that Hicks admitted undergoing weapons and guerrilla warfare training with British Islamic extremists, including shoe-bomber Richard Reid.

The British government made the claim in a letter to Hicks' lawyers late last year, the Melbourne newspaper The Age said. Details of the letter emerged in a London court on Friday.

The letter said Hicks admitted attending a training camp in Kashmir run by militant Islamic group Lashkar-e-Tayyaba in 2000 and "attending the al Farooq system of camps in Afghanistan in around 2001 . . . (and) receiving training in weapons and guerrilla warfare," The Age reported.

The al Farooq terror training camps in Afghanistan were funded and supported by al-Qaida.

Hicks also admitted, according to the letter, "meeting and training with a number of UK nationals known to be Islamic extremists, including Feroz Abbasi, Martin Mubanga, Richard Reid and Sajid Badat."

Reid is serving a life sentence in the United States for trying to blow up a trans-Atlantic flight with a bomb in his shoe on Dec. 22, 2001. He was subdued by fellow passengers on an American Airlines flight from Paris to Miami before he could detonate the device.

Badat was sentenced to 13 years in a British prison last year for conspiring with Reid to blow up the flight.

Feroz Abbasi and Martin Mubanga are Britons who were held in Guantanamo Bay on suspicion of having links to al-Qaida before being released without charge last year.

Hicks allegedly made the claims when he was interrogated in 2003 by agents from Britain's MI5 spy agency. He has been held at the U.S. prison since shortly after his 2001 arrest while serving with Taliban forces in Afghanistan.

Hicks' Australian lawyer, David McLeod, did not immediately return calls Sunday to his cell phone seeking comment. His office phone went unanswered.

Hicks' father previously has said his son may have served with the Pakistani militant group Lashkar-e-Tayyaba but that he went to Afghanistan on a pilgrimage. The Australian government lists that group as a terrorist organization.

While there, Hicks also helped patrol the border in the disputed Kashmir region Pakistan shares with India.

From Pakistan, he headed to Afghanistan. The charge sheet says Hicks attended several al-Qaida training courses at camps in Afghanistan, where he allegedly was serving with the Taliban when he was captured in late 2001 by the Northern Alliance and handed over to U.S. forces.

A former kangaroo skinner and cowboy in the Australian Outback, Hicks converted to Islam several years ago.

Details of the letter emerged during a London court case at which the British government is appealing a decision to grant Hicks British citizenship.

Hicks' mother was born in Britain and his lawyers hoped gaining British citizenship could lead to his release from Guantanamo Bay. London authorities have successfully lobbied for the release of Britons from the base in Cuba, but Australia's government steadfastly has refused to call on Washington to free Hicks.