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Bush Blasts Amnesty Report on Guantanamo

President says document is an 'absurd report'

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WASHINGTON - A human rights group's report about conditions at the U.S. military's prison at Guantanamo Bay is "absurd," President Bush told reporters Tuesday.

The Amnesty International report, released last week, said prisoners at the U.S. Navy base had been mistreated and called for the prison to be shut down.

The president, addressing a news conference at the White House, said the Amnesty document was an "absurd report."

"It's absurd. It's an absurd allegation. The United States is a country that promotes freedom around the world," Bush said of the report, which compared Guantanamo to a Soviet-era gulag.

He said the Amnesty allegations were based on interviews with detainees, who hated America and were trained to lie.

Bush's remarks echoed similar criticism by Vice President Dick Cheney.

"Frankly, I was offended by it," Cheney said in the videotaped interview with CNN's Larry King. "For Amnesty International to suggest that somehow the United States is a violator of human rights, I frankly just don't take them seriously."

Washington's defense of its detention and interrogation practices comes after weeks of international criticism and violent protests by Muslims outraged at reports — which the Pentagon says are false — that an interrogator at Guantanamo had flushed pages of the Quran down a toilet.

Iraq defense

On other issues, Bush said the fledging Iraqi government is "plenty capable" of defeating terrorists whose attacks on Iraqi civilians and U.S. soldiers have intensified.

"What you're seeing is a group of frustrated and desperate people who kill innocent life and we obviously mourn the loss of every life, but I believe the Iraqi government is plenty capable of dealing with them," Bush said at a Rose Garden news conference.

Bush spoke after separate air crashes killed four American and four Italian troops in Iraq. The governor of Anbar province, taken hostage three weeks ago, was killed during clashes between U.S. forces and the insurgents who abducted him.

On another foreign policy issue, Bush said he expressed concerns with Russian President Vladimir Putin about legal proceedings against former oil tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky. Once the richest man in Russia, Khodorkovsky was convicted Tuesday of fraud and tax evasion and sentenced to nine years in prison following a trial widely denounced as politically motivated.

Bush did not comment directly on the verdict, but said, "it looked like he had been judged guilty prior to having a fair trial."

The president said he has questioned whether the case shows a backsliding away from the rule of law and democracy in Russia and said it will “be interesting to see” how Khodorkovsky’s expected appeal is handled by the government.

“Here, you’re innocent until proven guilty and it appeared to us, at least people in my administration, that it looked like he had been adjudged guilty prior to having a fair trial,” Bush said. “We’re watching the ongoing case.”

Iran, economy comments

He said it was a “reasonable decision” to allow Iran to apply for WTO membership as a way to advance diplomatic discussions with Europe on Iran’s nuclear program. In another hot spot, he urged further diplomacy to curb North Korea’s nuclear ambitions.

Bush opened the news conference by urging Congress to pass his stalled energy legislation, restrain the growth of government spending, approve the Central American Free Trade Agreement and overhaul Social Security with a partial privatization plan.

He declared that the economy is strong, with 3.5 million jobs in two years and an unemployment rate of 5.2 percent. “Obviously, these are hopeful signs, but Congress can make sure the signs remain hopeful,” he said in a five-minute opening statement in the Rose Garden.

After a bruising week on Capitol Hill, Bush urged both political parties to “set aside partisan differences” and work together.

Though he did not mention tax cuts in his opening argument, Bush said he still wants Congress to make his first-term cuts permanent. He also pledged not to give up on Social Security reform, despite intense opposition on Capitol Hill. “The easy path is to say, ‘Oh, we don’t have a problem. Let’s ignore it — yet again.’”