

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

Wolf Blitzer Speaks with Alberto Gonzales

CNN: The Situation Room
March 9, 2006

President Bush today signed the measure re-authorizing the Patriot Act, saying it will improve national security and safeguard civil liberties of Americans. At the same time, there are new reports alleging very harsh treatment of terror suspects by Americans at Guantanamo Bay. I put both of those issues to the attorney general, Alberto Gonzales. Here's a part of our one-on-one interview.

BLITZER: Let's talk a little bit about torture. It's a sensitive subject, one that I know you've studied thoroughly. The allegations are significant.

I want to read to you from an article that appeared in "The New Yorker" magazine, the February 27th issue, referring to one Mohammed al-Katani (ph), a detainee at the U.S. naval base at Guantanamo Base, someone who is suspected of having played a role in terrorism against the United States.

"Mohammed al-Katani had been subjected to 160 days of isolation in a pen perpetually flooded with artificial light. He was interrogated on 48 of 54 days for 18 to 20 hours at a stretch. He had been stripped naked, straddled by taunting female guards in an exercise called invasion of space by a female.

"Forced to wear women's underwear on his head and to put on a bra. Threatened by guards, placed on a leash, and told that his mother was a whore. Eventually, he needed cardiac treatment because his health had deteriorated so significantly."

Is that torture?

ALBERTO GONZALES, ATTORNEY GENERAL: Wolf, I have no way of knowing whether any of that information that you've just read is, in fact, true, or how much of it is true. It's easy to make allegations about mistreatment in places like Guantanamo.

What I can say is that we have worked very hard throughout the administration to ensure that everyone understands what the legal requirements are. And to the extent that people aren't meeting those requirements, there are investigations, and people are held accountable.

BLITZER: Should the Guantanamo Base be shut down, as the United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan says? He says, "I think sooner or later, there will be a need to close Guantanamo. And I think it will be up to the government to decide, hopefully, to do it as soon as possible." What do you think?

GONZALES: Well, we operate Guantanamo because of necessity. And so, if the need were not there for the United States of America to detain people that we catch on the battlefield, then we would not be having to operate Guantanamo.

We are continually reassessing all of our activities in the war on terror, including operational facilities like Guantanamo, to ensure that they remain effective as a tool in the war against terror, and that they remain lawful.

So this is something we are constantly reevaluating in terms of -- what is the appropriate way ahead to ensure the national security interest of our country, and to ensure that we're fighting this war against a deadly enemy in a lawful manner?

BLITZER: You were the White House counsel, now you're the attorney general. You know all the laws that have been enacted, the guidelines. Are you comfortable in saying that you would hope that American detainees held by a foreign government would be treated as foreign detainees are being treated by the U.S. government?

GONZALES: What I would hope is that foreign governments would meet their domestic and international legal obligations with respect to treatment of people that they hold in their control, which is exactly what the United States of America is doing.

BLITZER: But if Americans were treated like the foreigners at Guantanamo or Abu Ghraib, would you be satisfied with that?

GONZALES: Well again, what we saw at Abu Ghraib was horrific. It should not have happened. It was not authorized. We have condemned it. And those involved in that kind of conduct -- there have been investigations, and they've been accountable. So that would be totally unacceptable.