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Clinton Adds Voice to Criticism of Guantánamo

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Bill Clinton has become the most prominent figure so far to add his voice to criticisms of the US prison camp at Guantánamo Bay in Cuba.

In an interview with the Financial Times, the former president called for the camp, set up to hold suspected terrorists, to “be closed down or cleaned up”.

Mr Clinton joined critics at home and abroad who have singled out the indefinite detention of prisoners without trial and widespread reports of human rights violations at Guantánamo. “It is time that there are no more stories coming out of there about people being abused,” he said.

Mr Clinton said the test for judging whether harsh treatment of terrorist suspects was justified was whether it challenged the “fundamental nature” of American society. If the answer is Yes, you have already given the terrorists a profound victory.”

The Bush administration has been rocked by criticism of prisoner abuse at Guantanamo Bay, which holds more than 500 prisoners, most of them captured in Afghanistan and Iraq. Mr Bush has said that he might be willing to explore alternatives to the detention centre.

The Guantánamo detainees have been classified as “unlawful enemy combatants” rather than prisoners of war and are therefore not subject to the Geneva Convention or to US law. The US military has admitted to using coercive interrogation techniques on prisoners but denied that these amount to torture.

Mr Clinton said uniformed US military personnel had been “very outspoken” about abuses at Guantánamo and elsewhere.

Aside from moral issues, there were two practical objections to the US military abusing prisoners, he said. “If we get a reputation for abusing people it puts our own soldiers much more at risk and second, if you rough up somebody bad enough, they’ll eventually tell you whatever you want to hear to get you to stop doing it.” Mr Clinton was careful to avoid criticising the administration on the issue of indefinite detention. In three or four cases, his own administration had resorted to a US law that allows suspected terrorists to be held beyond the normal length of time without trial, if bringing an indictment or trial would compromise intelligence sources.

“It sounds so reasonable but you’re the guy that is in prison and you are not guilty, you could be held there three, four, five years and there has to be some limit to that,” he said.

Amnesty International stoked controversy over Guantánamo Bay by calling it “the gulag of our time”, however it was criticised for drawing a comparison between US military prison and Soviet-era labor camps.

Last week, Senator Dick Durbin, a Democrat, got into similar hot water for comparing American interrogation techniques to those employed by Hitler and Stalin's regimes. He later issued a clarification.

During the interview Mr Clinton also discussed his role as special United Nations representative on tsunami relief and the Clinton Global Initiative, his plan to bring together politicians and business people to discuss solutions to some of the world's most intractable problems.