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Britain Calls on US to Close Guantánamo

Daniel Dombey in London and Sarah Laitner in Brussels
Financial Times
May 10 2006

The US should close its detention centre on Guantánamo Bay, the British government said on Wednesday night.

The call, by Lord Goldsmith, the attorney-general, is a dramatic break with Washington by its closest ally.

"The existence of Guantánamo Bay remains unacceptable," Lord Goldsmith said in a speech in London. "It is time, in my view, that it should close."

Lord Goldsmith, the government's top legal adviser, has had doubts about the legality of the detention centre for some time and Tony Blair, the UK prime minister, has branded it an "anomaly".

Angela Merkel, the German chancellor, also said that Guantánamo Bay "should not exist" when she visited President George W. Bush in January. But Wednesday night's speech marks the first time the British government has openly called on the Bush administration to close the centre down.

"Not only would it, in my personal opinion, be right to close Guantánamo as a matter of principle, I believe it would also help to remove what has become a symbol to many - right or wrong - of injustice," Lord Goldsmith said.

He argued that although some rights needed to be limited in combating terrorism, "there can be no compromise" on the principle of a fair trial.

"We in the UK were unable to accept that the US military tribunals proposed for those detained at Guantánamo Bay offered sufficient guarantees of a fair trial in accordance with international standards," he added, emphasising that the government had successfully pushed for all the British detainees to be returned to the UK.

The future of Guantánamo has already provoked internal sparring within the Bush administration, with officials in the State Department most concerned to limit the damage to the US's reputation.

"We do not want to keep Guantánamo open any longer than is necessary," said John Bellinger, chief legal adviser to the State Department, at a briefing in Brussels last week.

But, he asked: "What is the alternative? We would welcome good suggestions from other countries as to what should be done with these individuals, rather than just to simply say Guantánamo should be closed."

Washington says it had no option but to set up Guantánamo because of the nature of detainees who were neither traditional prisoners of war nor ordinary criminals and that hundreds of them had already been released.