

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

Guantanamo Britons 'losing sanity' as fears grow for terror suspects held in UK

Severin Carrell and Francis Elliott
December 12, 2004
The Independent

British detainees at Guantanamo Bay are "losing their sanity", their lawyers warn today.

US lawyers for the four Britons have told The Independent on Sunday that the men face at least two more years in Cuba as the US government blocks every legal move to get them released.

Gita Gutierrez, one of the first US defence lawyers to visit the British detainees, said the men were suffering serious mental problems after being held in solitary confinement for two years or more. The only hope of earlier release, she said, was if Tony Blair publicly intervened.

"I don't see how their sanity, much less their physical strength, will survive. It's very bad down there," she said. "If they were to remain languishing there, they will be broken and will experience permanent mental and physical deterioration when they leave." She added: "The British government has got to do something."

Her remarks highlight mounting fears from lawyers, civil rights groups and psychiatrists about the mental health of alleged al-Qa'ida supporters held without charge or trial at both Guantanamo Bay and in Britain.

As the IoS reveals today, two more detainees held by David Blunkett under emergency terrorism laws have been moved from Belmarsh high-security prison to Broadmoor secure mental hospital. The men, north Africans who came to Britain as political refugees, were moved in the past six weeks after severe mental problems. The transfer takes to four the number of detainees suffering from mental collapses. A Palestinian refugee, Abu Rideh, has been in Belmarsh since trying to kill himself last year, while the fourth man, who has polio and is known only as "G", was released on bail but put under house arrest after a special tribunal ruled he was too mentally ill to stay in Belmarsh.

Gareth Peirce, the London-based lawyer for many of the detainees, said: "Both men reached a life-threatening condition in Belmarsh prison and have been driven to severe mental illness and delusional thoughts and behaviour."

The transfer of the two men follows a warning by eight eminent psychiatrists in October that all the 12 detainees, now being held in Belmarsh, Woodhill prison near Milton Keynes, and Broadmoor, were suffering some degree of mental illness.

With the backing of the Foreign Office, a leading member of that panel, Dr James MacKeith, emeritus consultant psychiatrist at the Maudsley hospital, is trying to visit Guantanamo Bay to see British detainee Moazzam Begg, with his father Azmat Begg, and the Labour peer and mental health expert Lord Rea.

New details of alleged abuse suffered by the detainee emerged today. In an eight-page letter written in July, Mr Begg alleges that gun-wielding US interrogators at Bagram airbase, Afghanistan, chained and hooded him during questioning, that he and other prisoners were paraded naked and given ice-cold showers, deprived of sleep by bright lights and permanently denied natural light or fresh food. He also saw one prisoner being beaten to death.

After he arrived at Guantanamo Bay, he added: "I was coerced with further threats of execution, summary trial, no legal representation or family visits" into making false confessions.

The revelation follows further disclosures from another Briton held in Cuba, Martin Mubanga, 31, from south London. He alleges he was forced clear up his urine after being held so long he soiled himself, and a US agent stood on his hair during interrogation.

The detainees' US lawyers believe the US Department of Justice and FBI are preparing for a long legal battle over their fate which is expected to go to the US Supreme Court and last until 2006.

Brent Mickum, the US lawyer for Mr Mubanga, said the White House fears that a court victory for the Guantanamo prisoners would make it far harder to hold other terror suspects without trial - particularly the "ghost detainees", the dozen or more very senior al-Qa'ida figures secretly held overseas by the CIA and Pentagon.

There is little sign that President Bush's re-election has led to a more responsive attitude in Washington to repeated British requests for their repatriation. Even the official request for an independent psychiatric assessment of Mr Begg, made more than a month ago, has so far received no response.

His father, however, has had unconfirmed reports that his son may finally have been moved from solitary confinement in Camp Echo to Camp Delta - the less restrictive section of the prison.

One minister made clear the increasing bitterness at Washington's stance. He said: "America has become a law unto itself."

Lord Falconer, the Lord Chancellor, publicly attacked US policy on Friday when he said: "We could never countenance individuals being put beyond the law as has happened at Guantanamo Bay."

Ministers' attempt to draw a distinction between their internment policy and Guantanamo Bay will be undermined by the new evidence of the dramatic deterioration in the mental health of the Belmarsh detainees, however.

The Government has been repeatedly warned by official independent watchdogs that its internment policy is having a damaging effect on the mental health of inmates.

An unpublished Council of Europe report is believed to be highly critical of the failure of the Government to address its concerns over the mental health of a number inmates held without trial at Belmarsh and Woodhill.

The body's Committee for the Prevention of Torture visited all 12 detainees this March as part of a follow-up investigation following an inspection in 2002. It warned then the failure to allow them to contest the allegations was a "source of considerable distress, as was the indefinite nature of detention".

The body also found that two were suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. Though it said that all would benefit from psychological support it found what care there was was "haphazard".

The body's follow-up report has yet to be published by the Government, eight months after the committee's second visit. However, Terry Davis, new Secretary General of the 46-nation Council of Europe, told the IoS that the anti-torture committee's president, British criminologist Dr Silvia Casale, "is concerned about the conditions and treatment of people held at Belmarsh".

Mr Blunkett faces a fresh challenge over the emergency powers under which detainees are held. A panel of nine law lords is expected to rule on an appeal by lawyers for the men this Thursday.

The Foreign Office denied the Government was ignoring the fate of Britons at Guantanamo. A spokeswoman said Mr Blair had again raised their plight with President Bush in November.

She conceded that no decisions had been taken to support the detainees' court actions. "There are discussions going on at all sorts of levels. This is something we're very much engaged in."

The Home Office said it could not comment on the transfer of detainees to Broadmoor. A spokeswoman said the detainees were "suspected international terrorists who pose a threat to national security... mental health issues do not prevent an individual from posing a risk to national security."

Additional reporting by Robert Verkaik

A TALE OF TWO PRISONS

BELMARSH

Who's there?

Eight foreign nationals are held in Belmarsh and Woodhill prisons under anti-terrorism powers introduced after the 11 September attacks. A further three are held at Broadmoor, and one is under house arrest. Two names are known: Abu Qatada, a Palestinian Muslim cleric granted asylum 10 years ago, and Abu Rideh, a Palestinian refugee, in Broadmoor.

What are they there for?

They are held under legislation allowing the Home Secretary to indefinitely detain without trial any foreign national he suspects of involvement in international terrorism.

What are conditions like?

The UN's Committee on Torture expressed concern at conditions in Belmarsh and urged the Government to review alternatives to indefinite detention.

GUANTANAMO

Who's there?

Around 550 detainees from some 40 countries, including four British citizens - Moazzam Begg from Manchester, Feroz Abbasi from Croydon, Richard Belmar and Martin Mubanga - plus four British residents without citizenship.

What are they there for?

The US claims the men are "enemy combatants", most of whom are thought to have been captured by the US and their Northern Alliance allies during the 2001 war in Afghanistan. They are all alleged to have had some involvement in international terrorism or ties to the Taliban. Only four detainees have been charged.

What are conditions like?

According to the Pentagon, it "operates a safe, humane and professional detention operation". The Red Cross takes a different view.