

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

Blair: Guantánamo is an Anomaly

Guardian Unlimited
February 17, 2006

Tony Blair today said the US detention camp at Guantánamo Bay in Cuba was an "anomaly" that would have to be "dealt with".

In Berlin to meet the German chancellor, Angela Merkel, the prime minister was asked whether he supported a call from his Northern Ireland secretary, Peter Hain, for the centre to be closed.

"I have always said it is an anomaly, and sooner or later has to be dealt with," the prime minister told a news conference, repeating a comment he made to MPs last November.

Last night, Mr Hain told BBC1's Question Time: "I would prefer that it [Guantánamo] was not there. I would prefer it was closed, yes."

Asked whether it was government policy that Guantánamo should be shut down, he replied: "That's what I think."

Mr Hain was asked for his reaction to a United Nations report, backed by UN secretary general Kofi Annan, calling for inmates to be tried or released and for the camp's immediate closure. Some aspects of prisoners' treatment, including the force-feeding of hunger strikers, amounted to torture, the report said.

The camp, opened in 2002 to hold terror suspects seized during the Afghanistan war, is believed to currently contain around 500 inmates.

Mr Hain said the British government accepted that useful information had been obtained from detainees at Guantánamo, but had always been uncomfortable with the camp's existence.

"What we have said all along is, we don't agree with that," he said. "[The prime minister] has said that as a matter of fact some of the information that came from there was of importance, but that does not mean to say that he thinks the place should have been set up in the first place. There's a distinction there."

He added: "We've always said that Guantánamo Bay was something that should not have happened."

The chairman of the Commons foreign affairs committee, the Labour MP Mike Gapes, welcomed Mr Hain's comments.

"I think the British government was reluctant for a long time to make very strong public statements because we had British citizens still in there," he told the BBC.

"I think anybody who reads this report will see that in many respects there are aspects of the Guantánamo regime that are very, very open to criticism. It is not in America's own interests to maintain this place."

The veteran South African anti-apartheid campaigner Archbishop Desmond Tutu today joined the chorus of criticism of Guantánamo Bay.

"I never imagined I would live to see the day when the United States and its satellites would use precisely the same arguments that the apartheid government used for detention without trial. It is disgraceful," he told the BBC's Today programme.

"One cannot find strong enough words to condemn what Britain and the United States and some of their allies have accepted."

He also attacked Mr Blair's failed attempt to hold terrorist suspects in Britain for up to 90 days without charge.

"Ninety days for a South African is an awful deja vu because we had in South Africa, in the bad old days, a 90-day detention law," he said.

Yesterday's UN report, ordered by the body's commission on human rights, urged the US government to refrain from any practice "amounting to torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment" at Guantánamo.

Mr Annan said: "I think sooner or later there will be a need to close Guantánamo, and I think it will be up to the [US] government to decide, hopefully, to do it as soon as is possible."

Following the report's publication, the US administration dismissed its findings as "largely without merit".

Nine British nationals who were detained there have now been flown back to the UK and released without charge.

None of the current inmates at Guantánamo is British, but Amnesty International believes eight were resident in the UK, and that some have relatives here.

Yesterday, three long-term UK residents (though not British citizens) got the go-ahead to seek a high court order requiring the foreign secretary, Jack Straw, to petition for their release from the base.

A judge in London said allegations of torture at the facility meant the detainees and their families living in the UK could make the case that the British government was under an obligation to act on their behalf.

Lawyers for the three men, Bisher al-Rawi, Jamil el-Banna and Omar Deghayes, and their families were told there was "no guarantee" they would win the case, expected to be heard in full in mid-March.