

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

ICRC chief tackles Bush on captives

Guy Dinmore
Financial Times
February 15 2005

Jakob Kellenberger, the head of the International Committee of the Red Cross, met President George W. Bush on Monday to discuss a wide range of humanitarian issues, with the focus expected to be ICRC concerns over the status and treatment of detainees held by the US at Guantánamo Bay.

Neither side released details of the first meeting between the two. The White House said Mr Bush expressed appreciation of ICRC efforts over 50 years in advocating the protection of US prisoners overseas. They agreed to continue to work closely together.

Mr. Kellenberger is visiting Washington for two days at a sensitive time for the Bush administration, which is reviewing interrogation procedures worldwide and investigating allegations of abuse at the detention centre in the US enclave in Cuba.

The ICRC, which monitors conditions at Guantánamo, said last November it was concerned that "significant problems regarding conditions and treatment" had not been adequately addressed. After Mr. Kellenberger's last visit to Washington a year ago, the ICRC said its concern was that US authorities had placed detainees beyond the law. The US says they are "unlawful enemy combatants" who fall outside the Geneva Convention. Mr Bush ordered that they be treated humanely, however.

The leaking of incriminating photographs compelled the US to admit last year to the abuse of prisoners in Abu Ghraib in Iraq, and low-ranking soldiers were held responsible. But the US rejects allegations of torture and abuse at Guantánamo, set up to house terrorist suspects captured following the 2001 ousting of Afghanistan's Taliban rulers.

Two months ago, however, the public release of FBI e-mails exposed allegations of abuse. FBI officials described seeing detainees chained in the foetal position without food or water for more than 24 hours, use of extreme temperatures, sleep deprivation, loud music, bright lights and intimidation by dogs. Lawrence DiRita, the Pentagon spokesman, told the FT that "some individuals" had been held accountable for "infractions of varying severity" at Guantánamo. He gave no details.

Attorneys representing about 60 of the 550 or so detainees held at Guantánamo allege that physical and mental abuse is continuing. Marc Falkoff, representing 13 Yemenis, said there was "systematic degradation and humiliation of detainees based on their piety and religious values" as Muslims.