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## **Kuwait's Guantanamo Bay prisoners demand justice**

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Washington: Lawyers acting for the families of the 12 Kuwaiti citizens held at Guantanamo base for the last three years on Thursday called on Congress to aggressively question a policy that violates US law and fails to honour US Supreme Court decisions.

The five-member legal team was represented by Attorney Ms Kristin Huskey, who had arranged for Khaled Al-Odah, the father of one of the detainees, 25-year old Fawzi Khaled Fahad Al-Odah, to be in live phone contact with correspondents attending the press conference at the National Press Club.

The Kuwaiti Family Committee which was formed in Kuwait some time ago said in an opening statement that President Bush should issue an order condemning repeated abuses at the US naval base of Guantanamo. It quoted from an FBI memorandum released this week that portrays abuse of prisoners by American military personnel in Iraq that included detainees being beaten and choked and lit cigarettes being thrust in their ears.

Khaled Al-Odah, a former air force pilot, who heads the Committee, said from Kuwait, "This has gone on too long and has become too much for us to bear. Each day brings yet another report of mishandling and torture of prisoners in Guantanamo, yet no formal charges have been brought against those victims after more than three years of captivity. It is time for President Bush to order humane treatment of these individuals and to push forward with legal proceedings." None of the prisoners has been charged with a crime but they have been kept in detention which is a violation of the Geneva Conventions and a US Supreme Court ruling in June 2004.

His wife, Souad Al-Odah spoke to reporters and repeatedly broke down while trying to convey what she said was "the grief of a mother who cannot bear the thought of her son being beaten and tortured."

Al-Odah said, "My son is not a terrorist. My son admires America and its tradition of fairplay and full legal rights for all, or at least he used to before he was abducted by bounty hunters and sold to the United States."

Almost all of the Kuwaiti prisoners were caught in Pakistan by local villagers and tribesmen in the NWFP area or by government agents and, according to their lawyers and their families, sold to the Americans for a reported price of \$10,000 each. Asked if any of the 12 Kuwaitis was a member of Al Qaeda or some other militant group, their lawyer Ms Huskey answered in the negative. According to her they had gone to Pakistan to help Afghans, some to teach the Quran, a couple to spread the message of Islam, being "Tableeghis", but none of them was a soldier. Some of the men were teachers. In answer to the question if the prisoners were guilty, Ms Huskey said that the question of guilt or innocence is for a court to decide in a fair trial.

Ms Huskey - who recently returned from Guantanamo - replied that she was under an obligation place by government not to divulge what she was told, when asked about what the Kuwaiti prisoners had told her. However, her own observations left little doubt that the inmates were kept in harsh conditions. They were in shackles and while they were being interviewed by the lawyer, a security person was present. It was a kind of "endless nightmare". She found all of them to be thin and it was difficult to state what the state of their mental health was. She met the prisoners at Camp Echo but was not given as much time with them as she would have wanted. The prisoners

were kept shackled to the floor while she talked to them, but their handcuffs were temporarily taken off. They were in orange, olive green and white uniforms, but she was not told what these colours signified. They were not allowed to do much exercise. This was the first time in three years that a lawyer had met them, she said.

Khaled Al Odah, answering a question by phone from Kuwait, said that though the legal expenses were being paid by the Kuwaiti government he felt that it was not exercising full pressure on the US, a close ally, to release the prisoners who were innocent of any wrongdoing.

Asked if he would come to the US and try to see his son, he replied that although he had a visa he was not sure if the officials at the airport of arrival would honour that visa, as several Kuwaitis had found out. He said the Arab media and press had been supportive of the prisoners but the official media in Kuwait had tended to be "careful" with coverage. He said Kuwait had a "lot of tools" it could use to put pressure on the US, but had refrained from doing so for some reason.

Al-Odah said that he had received a postcard from his son last November after two years and all that the card said was, "Hello, how are you?" All else had been blacked out by the camp censors.

Ms Huskey told the press that during a hearing at the District of Columbia District Court, she had asked a government lawyer if an old woman living in Switzerland, who had donated money to what she thought was a good cause, were to learn later that the money had gone to Al Qaeda, would she be seen as a supporter of terrorism. He had replied in the affirmative. She was not sure if the Kuwaiti prisoners would be produced in court when the hearings began in Washington. She said noting had been made easy for the defence. She had had to wait a long time for permission to visit her clients. She acknowledged the help and cooperation extended by the American Civil Liberties Union to the case.