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## Clinton Calls for Guantanamo Closure

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Bill Clinton, the former president of the United States, today became the most prominent voice in an escalating chorus of criticism over Guantanamo Bay, demanding that the prison camp in Cuba is "closed down or cleaned up."

In an interview with the Financial Times, Mr Clinton said that the majority of US military personnel were also opposed to the continued detention of terror suspects without trial at the naval base.

He said: "Well it either needs to be closed down or cleaned up. It's time that there are no more stories coming out of there about people being abused."

Mr Clinton admitted that legislation which enabled suspects to be held beyond the usual time limits had been enforced "from time to time" during his presidential term, when formal prosecutions would have endangered intelligence sources or national security.

But adding his voice to those of Jimmy Carter, the former President, Joe Biden, the senior Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and a growing number of Republicans, he told the FT: "It sounds so reasonable, but if you're the guy who's in prison and you're not guilty, you could be held there three, four, five years and there has to be some limit to that."

Mr Clinton said that as well as the troubling ethical and human rights dilemmas, there are two serious practical problems associated with indefinite detention: the damage to the reputations of US and British forces, and the danger of obtaining false confessions.

He said: "If you are trying to preserve and expand freedom you want to convict the guilty and exonerate the innocent. If people are abused and they confess, or they finger other people, and you gather up those who are not guilty, then as a practical matter you've let the guilty go free and you are vulnerable to whatever they are going to do to you.

"The vast majority of our military personnel are opposed to the abusive practices on moral ground because it makes the people serving under them more vulnerable.

"I don't think you can just hold these people forever. Sooner or later you've got to move or let them go. It is just inimical to a free society."

Mr Clinton - who will host the first Clinton Global Initiative problem-solving summit in September - joined critics at home and abroad who have singled out the indefinite detention of prisoners and widespread reports of human rights violations at Guantanamo.

He said that the test for judging whether harsh treatment of terrorist suspects was justified was whether it challenged the 'fundamental nature' of American society: "If the answer is yes, you have already given the terrorists a profound victory."

The Bush administration has been rocked by reports of prisoner abuse at Guantanamo which holds more than 500 prisoners, most of them captured in Afghanistan and Iraq. Earlier this month, President Bush appeared to hint that the prison could be closed saying that the Administration was exploring "all possible alternatives."

The Guantanamo detainees have been classified as unlawful enemy combatants rather than prisoners of war and are therefore not subject to the Geneva Convention or to US law. The US military has admitted using coercive interrogation techniques on prisoners but denied that these amount to torture.

Amnesty International stoked controversy over Guantanamo Bay by calling it "the gulag of our time", however it was criticised for drawing a comparison between US military prison and Soviet-era labour camps.

Last week, Senator Dick Durbin, a Democrat, got into similar hot water for comparing American interrogation techniques to those employed by Hitler and Stalin's regimes. He later issued a clarification.

Meanwhile, a recent Pentagon report acknowledged five incidents in which the Koran had been desecrated, although accusations published in Newsweek magazine suggesting that copies had been flushed down a toilet, which triggered deadly riots in Pakistan, are denied.

Several prominent Republicans, among them Mel Martinez, a Florida Senator and former Bush cabinet member, have publicly argued that the damage to America's image caused by the prison now outweighs any practical benefits. Joe Biden, the senior Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, has described the prison's image as a 'recruiting agent' for al-Qaeda.

The administration remains divided on the issue. The White House has hinted at a possible closure but senior officials including Dick Cheney, the Vice President, and Donald Rumsfeld insist that there is no practical alternative, and that detainees are providing valuable information in the 'war on terror'.