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Minister says Guantanamo policy unacceptable

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LONDON - Washington's policy on the legal status of detainees at the Guantanamo Bay prison camp in Cuba is unacceptable, a senior minister has said.

"I myself regard it as wholly unacceptable that you could seek to put people beyond the reach of the law, and it was argued by the United States of America that that was what the effect of placing detainees in Cuba had done," Lord Charles Falconer, secretary of state for constitutional affairs, said.

Falconer, a close ally of Prime Minister Tony Blair, welcomed the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling in June that said prisoners have the right to challenge their incarceration in civilian courts.

"The U.S. Supreme Court has said those detainees are within the reach of the law, so the totally unacceptable position of people being beyond the reach of the law has now been brought to an end," he told reporters on Tuesday.

Britain now awaited the conclusions of the American courts in relation to what procedures will be used to deal with the detainees at Guantanamo, Falconer said.

Four Britons are being held at Guantanamo, which was set up in January 2002 to hold combatants captured in Afghanistan and others suspected of association with al Qaeda.

Guantanamo is an ongoing headache for Blair, under fire from his Labour Party and the public for failing to make progress on the issue despite his close relations with U.S. President George W. Bush.

Earlier this month, Bush was dealt a further setback when a Washington federal court judge ruled that Guantanamo tribunals should not continue in their present form and that many of the 550 detainees were probably prisoners of war, eligible for rights under the Geneva Conventions.

The Pentagon on Tuesday flatly rejected accusations -- contained in an International Committee of the Red Cross report -- that U.S. military used tactics "tantamount to torture" in Guantanamo.

The ICRC memorandum was leaked to the New York Times.