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Australian Group Campaigns to Free Guantánamo Prisoner

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SYDNEY, Australia -- In a little more than a week, a new grass-roots political movement here has gathered more than 7,000 names of supporters on its Web site in a campaign to free David Hicks, an Australian citizen being held in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba.

The organization, GetUp!, was founded this month by two young Australians. They collected the names for a letter to the Australian foreign minister, Alexander Downer, demanding that he take action to have Mr. Hicks, 30, brought back to Australia to stand trial.

Mr. Hicks was taken prisoner in Afghanistan in December 2001 and sent to Guantánamo. In June 2004, American prosecutors charged him with conspiracy to commit war crimes, attempted murder and aiding the enemy.

Australian officials have said repeatedly that he has not violated any Australian laws, so bringing him back would likely be tantamount to giving him his freedom.

"We're blown away," Lachlan Harris, a spokesman for GetUp!, said about the response to the campaign. "Signing a letter for someone accused of serious crimes is not something one does lightly."

A spokesman for Mr. Downer dismissed the campaign. "It's another group attacking the Howard government," said the spokesman, Chris Kenny, referring to Prime Minister John Howard. "What's new?"

GetUp! describes itself as a progressive organization - its founders say they were inspired by the left-leaning American advocacy group MoveOn.org, - but its campaign coincides with a growing discomfort among Australians across the political spectrum over the lengthy detention of Mr. Hicks and the fact that American officials plan to try him in a secret military tribunal rather than in open court. In closed-door meetings of Mr. Howard's center-right Liberal Party, increasing numbers of party members are expressing concern.

In a break from the normal practice of not speaking on political issues, the chief justice of the Supreme Court for the country's most populous state, New South Wales, who is a Labor government appointee, this week offered a glancing criticism of the American procedures. "Military justice bears the same relationship to justice as military music does to music," the justice, Jim Spigelman, told The Sydney Morning Herald.

The Bush administration has assured the Australian government that it has a strong case against Mr. Hicks, several Australian officials said. But many Australian officials, most of whom asked not to be identified, say they are skeptical.

The Australian Federal Police conducted the most extensive investigation into Mr. Hicks's activity in Afghanistan and Pakistan, sending investigators there. One senior law enforcement official said the case against him was "very weak."

Another senior Australian official, from a different agency, said that while there is little doubt that Mr. Hicks trained with Al Qaeda, the United States did not appear to have any witnesses who

could testify to it. And American and Australian officials have said there is no evidence that Mr. Hicks ever shot at any American soldier in Afghanistan.

The prevailing view among Australian law enforcement and intelligence officials is that Mr. Hicks is more of a lost soul than a hardened terrorist. After being expelled from school at 14, he drifted, skinning kangaroos in the outback, training horses in Japan and going to the Balkans to fight Serb ethnic cleansing with the Kosovo Liberation Army, they said.

He went to an evangelical Christian church before trying Islam and heading to Pakistan. He fought in Kashmir with Lashkar-e-Taiba, a militant Islamic army backed by Pakistani's intelligence services, then went to Afghanistan.

Australian intelligence said that after being rejected for Al Qaeda training, Mr. Hicks returned to Pakistan, spent more time in a religious school, then applied again and was accepted. This level of commitment has led some Australian officials to reject that notion that Mr. Hicks is naïve or a wayward soul.