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Guantanamo Play to be Staged in Parliament

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LONDON (Reuters) - A play reliving the detention of Guantanamo Bay prisoners is to be staged in parliament by human rights activists bidding to push their plight up the political agenda.

"This is the court of public opinion -- the idea is to educate the folks in the House of Commons on what is happening," lawyer Clive Stafford Smith said on Monday.

The reading of the play "Guantanamo - Honour Bound to Defend Freedom" is being staged on Thursday in one of the 150-seat committee rooms in the lower chamber before an invited audience of parliamentarians, lawyers and human rights organisations.

Stafford Smith has worked as legal representative for detainees at the naval base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and is also known for his work defending death row inmates in the United States.

"This does remind us about the rule of law," he told Reuters. "This is not on the radar of some politicians. We are talking human rights here and that applies to all human beings."

Nine British citizens were held at Guantanamo, set up by the United States in early 2002 to hold suspects captured in Afghanistan and others suspected of association with al Qaeda.

Five were released in 2004 and the remaining four were freed in January 2005.

But Stafford Smith considers it essential to maintain political pressure.

"I am representing eight of the nine British residents who are still being detained in Guantanamo," he said. "They either had refugee status or leave to remain in Britain."

"Why is it that people who have lived for decades in this country, who have British children, can't get any support from the British government?"

The United States classifies the prisoners as enemy combatants and not prisoners of war, thus denying them rights accorded to PoWs under the Geneva Conventions.

The Pentagon has said the detainees are treated humanely and not tortured.

The play by journalist Victoria Brittain and South African-born novelist Gillian Slovo is based on personal testimonies from families of the prisoners as well as statements from lawyers, government spokesmen and medical experts.

It was staged at Tricycle Theatre in a series of "verbatim theatre" productions on such subjects as the racist murder of black teenager Stephen Lawrence and the Hutton inquiry into the suicide of weapons scientist David Kelly.

Stafford Smith is set to make a surreal debut on Thursday -- for the first time he will be playing himself in the play.

"That is a truly terrifying experience -- but at least I will get to be badly dressed in my own right," he said.

