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PM Finally Calls for Guantanamo to Close

Colin Brown
The Independent
March 17, 2006

Tony Blair joined the growing calls for the US detention camp at Guantanamo Bay to be closed after he was questioned about the claims of torture by two British residents held there.

Mr Blair was challenged at his regular monthly press conference at 10 Downing Street yesterday over the graphic and shocking claims by two men who lived in Britain that they were handed over to the CIA by the security service MI5 for torture in the notorious "dark prison" in Kabul, Afghanistan, before being taken to Guantanamo.

Nine Britons were released, but Bisher al-Rawi and Jamil el-Banna are still in the detention camp in Cuba after more than three years. They are demanding their freedom with another man, Omar Deghayes. They won permission to seek a High Court order requiring the UK to petition for their release.

Mr al-Rawi and Mr el-Banna claim they were asked by MI5 to work for them, but were later handed to the CIA for "rendition". Neither of the men were picked up in Afghanistan, but were associates of the Muslim cleric Abu Qatada in London.

Their lawyer, George B Mickum, a partner in a respected Washington law firm who had access to classified evidence, reported in The Independent yesterday that they were arrested in the African state of Gambia in November 2002. They were flown by the CIA to Afghanistan, where they were manacled, interrogated and imprisoned underground before being transferred to Guantanamo.

They claimed that while in Kabul they were beaten, kicked and hit with blunt objects, as well as being held in solitary confinement and kept in freezing conditions to induce hypothermia.

The Prime Minister in the past has said holding the detainees in the camp in Cuba outside the normal rules of war or criminal courts was an "anomaly" which had to be ended.

Peter Hain, the Northern Ireland Secretary, recently went further by calling for the camp to be closed, but Mr Blair had been reluctant to do so to avoid allowing a diplomatic breach with the US President, George Bush, over Guantanamo.

But, questioned yesterday about the claims, Mr Blair said: "I can't comment on individual cases. I think they are the subject of a court action. I have said that I think it would be better if it [Guantanamo] was closed for all the reasons that we have given over a long period of time."

He added: "The only thing I always do to balance it out is remind people that it arose out of the circumstances of 9/11. In fairness to the Americans, they dispute many of these claims that are made. And there are things, certainly, that I have read about the circumstances of some of the British who were in Guantanamo that are strongly disputed in certain quarters."

The Prime Minister's call for Guantanamo to be closed was welcomed last night by Andrew MacKinlay, a Labour member of the Commons Select Committee on Foreign Affairs, which is conducting an inquiry into the war on terrorism.

But he said Mr Blair had been a "wimp" in failing to make stronger protests to President Bush in the past after a UN report last month found that some of the treatment of prisoners amounted to torture.

"Guantanamo Bay is wholly unacceptable and its legal status makes it even more dreadful," he said. "The injustice of holding these people without charge for so long, contrary to Western norms, is compounded by each day they spend in custody. They should either be brought to trial or they should be freed," he said.

The judge who gave Mr al-Rawi, Mr el-Banna and Mr Deghayes leave to apply for a High Court order to demand their release, Mr Justice Collins, said during their hearing that America's idea of torture "doesn't appear to coincide with that of most civilised countries".

In an earlier report, the Foreign Affairs Committee said: "We find that the Government's position on the detentions at Guantanamo Bay does not sit easily with its pledge to 'respect, and urge others to respect, those human rights laid down in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights that can never be compromised, even in states of emergency'."

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