

The following text may be printed, copy/pasted, or downloaded and emailed.

Minister Says Guantanamo Must Close to Save Democracy

By Andy McSmith
The Independent
March 8, 2006

The US camp at **Guantanamo Bay** should be closed before it undermines the cause of democracy worldwide, a Foreign Office minister has warned.

The remarks by Kim Howells yesterday coincided with one of the most direct appeals yet by a high-ranking American figure for British support over **Guantanamo Bay's** continued existence. The Attorney General, Alberto Gonzales, on a visit to London, said the camp was lawful and necessary.

Mr Howells, the minister in charge of British policy in the Middle East, warned: "Our alliance with America is based on shared values. If those shared values are seen by the rest of the world to be terribly flawed that actually undermines the cause of democracy. If Guantanamo is undermining those shared values then it should go, it should close." Mr Howells went on to claim that the US had a problem with the "time scale".

"If you closed the camp down tomorrow, what would you do with these people? Where would they go? It's a difficult one. But the central point is if it is seen to be undermining the cause of democracy and freedom, you have got to address that."

Mr Howells' comments go beyond anything said about **Guantanamo Bay** by Tony Blair, or by the Foreign Secretary Jack Straw. Mr Blair's official spokesman said yesterday: "He has always said that it is an anomaly that should be dealt with sooner rather than later, but he has equally recognised the circumstances under which it arose."

Mr Howells was speaking at a meeting in the House of Commons organised by Human Rights Watch to discuss whether governments have been "bending the rules" that forbid torture and civil rights abuses. The shadow Foreign Secretary, William Hague, told the same meeting: "Reports of prisoner abuse by British and American troops -however isolated - and accounts, accurate or not, of the mistreatment of detainees at Guantanamo and extraordinary rendition flights leading to the torture of suspects, have led to a critical erosion in our moral authority. In standing up for the rule of law, we must be careful not to employ methods that undermine it."

Mr Gonzales claimed that the 500 Guantanamo detainees included terrorist trainers, bomb makers, former bodyguards of Osama bin Laden, and potential suicide bombers. All are assessed by US authorities and given a separate, formal hearing of their case before a tribunal, with a right to appeal.

"We operate Guantanamo because there's a necessity, a need, for the United States to detain enemy combatants somewhere," he said, in a speech to the International Institute for Strategic Studies. "That was the genesis of Guantanamo. This need continues today."