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Strike Camp

It is time to set a date for Guantanamo's closure

Editorial
The London Times
April 28, 2006

Our report by Bronwen Maddox on the detention centre at the US naval station at Guantanamo Bay is a rare glimpse into the workings of a camp that has provoked enormous controversy, numerous lawsuits and much hostile comment around the world in the four years since its opening. Until recently, the US Government and the military authorities were at pains to keep many details secret: little information was available on how many people were held there, where they were from, what they were suspected of doing before capture or whether they would face formal trial.

Gradually, the US Administration has begun to make regular what has always been an anomaly in American justice. It has released or transferred 276 of at least 760 detainees originally taken to Cuba. It has listed a further 141 for transfer to their own countries. It has been prompted, under the Freedom of Information Act, to publish the names of all those still held in the camp. And it has laid the groundwork for the military commissions, the special tribunals to try the remaining detainees.

There is no doubt that Guantanamo has hurt the image of the US, but some of its more vocal critics will find other issues on which to fault Washington and will not be prepared to concede that there were extraordinary circumstances which led to an extraordinary, and necessarily temporary, response. The absurd conclusion is that this exceptional response is representative of the US approach to all legal and international obligations, but there is pressure on Washington, given its leadership role, to be seen to be fair in its treatment of those detained. That obligation is certainly not observed by the extremists.

The US courts have been cautious in upholding the challenges to Guantanamo. But, as our report makes clear, even within the Pentagon there are doubts about the camp's legal framework. There are also those who argue that further intelligence from the detainees is unlikely: those who were willing to co-operate have done so, and those still refusing to talk probably know little that could still be useful to troops operating in Afghanistan.

The Bush Administration would be well advised to end the controversy and close the camp. It was right to dismiss the self-serving claims that many of the inmates are innocent - how many young Muslims visited the Tora Bora mountains out of innocent curiosity while the US was preparing to fight the Taliban? Perhaps they mistook Tora Bora for the holiday resort of Bora Bora.

The Pentagon was also right to glean any information it could from suspected terrorists. But their continued detention without trial is proving counter-productive. The orange jumpsuits have given America's enemies a useful propaganda image. And the US Supreme Court has given detainees the right to challenge their detention. Those already released should be closely monitored. But for the rest, a date should be set for closure and the remaining detainees should be dealt with expeditiously.