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US set to release most Guantánamo detainees

Mark Huband
Financial Times
January 9, 2005

The US is preparing to release or transfer many of the 549 detainees who are currently being held at the country's naval base at Guantánamo Bay in Cuba, a senior US defence official has told the Financial Times.

The official said "a significant portion will gradually be transferred or released" as part of a restructuring of the camp. This will include the construction of a new prison at the base, in which the US intends to hold long-term prisoners.

Among those expected to be transferred are four British citizens, whose detention has been a source of friction between the White House and its closest foreign ally. According to a senior UK counter-terrorism official, an announcement regarding the transfer of the British detainees "is expected within the next couple of weeks".

The UK official did not say whether the four would be prosecuted on terrorism charges on their return to Britain.

Five British citizens who were released from Guantánamo Bay into UK custody last year were freed within days of their arrival back in Britain. "It's a question of dealing with them under UK law. If there is evidence, then people are charged and imprisoned," said a spokeswoman for the British foreign office.

The senior US defence official said that an increase in the number of transfers - to an unspecified number of the 19 countries whose nationals are being held at Guantánamo Bay - was part of a long-term plan to create a permanent prison at the base.

The prison, which is to be called Camp Six, would have space for up to 200 detainees whom the US does not want to see released. The prison will have more communal living areas than the current maximum security installation at the base.

The new jail will also have improved medical facilities, "particularly to deal with mental health problems", the defence official said.

He added that the release or transfer of Guantánamo detainees to custody within their home countries "depends on what other countries are willing to step up and commit to".

Those prisoners who the US is planning to keep at the base for the long term will continue to be held indefinitely as "enemy combatants", the official said. This designation has been criticised by legal officials in the US, who have been battling with the Pentagon to exercise legal jurisdiction over the detainees.

The US defence official said that 25 percent of the detainees were still of intelligence value. The Pentagon has based its detention policy on each prisoners' value as a source of intelligence as well as on an assessment of the potential threat that they would pose if released.

"There is a change in the balance between the detention mission and the interrogation mission," the official acknowledged.

