

PRESS RELEASE

USA: Independent investigation must be held into deaths of three Guantánamo detainees

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Amnesty International today called for a fully independent investigation led by civilians into the deaths of three Guantanamo detainees after apparent suicides.

The organisation also called on the US government to give the group of five UN experts immediate and unrestricted access to the Guantánamo detention centre, and in particular allow the experts to talk privately with detainees.

The detainees who died have been identified as Saudi nationals Mane'i bin Shaman bin Turki al-Habardi al-'Otaybi and Yassar Talal 'Abdullah Yahia al-Zahrani, who was reportedly 17 when he was taken into custody, and Yemeni national 'Ali 'Abdullah Ahmed.

"This has been tragedy waiting to happen. A full independent investigation is a matter of absolute urgency particularly in the light of statements from high-ranking members of the US military and government, which risk undermining the investigation launched by the Naval Criminal Investigation Service," said Rob Freer, Amnesty International's researcher on the US.

The dismissal of the deaths of the three detainees by the US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy, Colleen Graffy as "a good PR move to draw attention" shows a chilling disregard for human life.

Amnesty International is also deeply concerned by the statement from the Commander of Joint Task Force Guantánamo, Navy Rear Admiral Harry B. Harris that the three detainees had not killed themselves out of desperation, but as "an act of asymmetric warfare".

"The Commander's statement is entirely inappropriate, and is part of a pattern of official commentary on the presumed guilt of detainees who have never had an opportunity to challenge their detentions in a court of law," said Rob Freer.

Furthermore, the military authorities have shown themselves to be oblivious to the psychological suffering of the detainees. Earlier, military psychiatrists reportedly reclassified suicide attempts as "manipulative self-injurious behaviour", resulting in a decrease in the rate of suicide attempts officially recorded.

Detainees, including released detainees interviewed by Amnesty International, have spoken of the psychological impact of the isolation and indefinite nature of the Guantánamo regime — conditions that Amnesty International has defined as amounting to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment prohibited under international law.

“Amnesty International has long been concerned that some Guantánamo prisoners are so psychologically damaged by being held for years on end without charge or trial that they are becoming suicidal,” said Rob Freer.

“President George W. Bush has it within his power to order an end to this human rights scandal now and to ensure that detainees are either brought to fair trial or released with full safeguards as a matter of urgency”.

International pressure for the closure of the detention centre has been mounting.

Three years ago, the International Committee of the Red Cross - the only outside organization with access to the detainees - took the unusual step of making public its concern that the indefinite detention regime at Guantánamo was having severe psychological repercussions on the detainees.

Last month the United Nations Committee Against Torture joined the growing calls for closure of the Guantánamo Bay detention facility, concluding that this indefinite detention without charge is itself a violation of the Convention against Torture.

Amnesty International reiterates its call for closure of Guantánamo Bay, which must be carried out without transferring the lawlessness elsewhere. There must be full disclosure of all other US “war on terror” detentions, which should be brought into full compliance with international law. Those detainees who are to be released but cannot be returned to their countries because they risk of grave human rights abuses must be offered protection by the USA. Other countries, if necessary, should assist.

The organization also reiterates its call for a full independent commission of inquiry into all aspects of the USA’s detention and interrogation policies and practices in the “war on terror”, including renditions and secret detentions.

In another development apparently related to the deaths, on 10 June, John D. Altenburg, the Appointing Authority for Military Commissions, issued an order staying all proceedings by military commission. Pre-trial hearings had been scheduled to occur this and next week.

Amnesty International opposes the trials by military commission, which fall far short of international standards for fair trial. The organization continues to call on President Bush to rescind the Military Order of 13 November 2001 establishing the commissions. He should not wait for the US Supreme Court to rule on the issue.

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