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Leading rights groups urge Obama to stop Guantánamo proceedings against child soldiers

Five leading human rights and civil liberties groups delivered a letter to President-elect Barack Obama on January 12, 2009, urging him to suspend the Guantánamo Bay military commissions and to ensure that the upcoming trial of Omar Khadr, a 22-year-old Canadian, does not proceed. The trial is scheduled to begin on January 26, six days after the presidential inauguration.

Khadr is slated to be tried before the widely discredited military commissions for war crimes he is alleged to have committed when he was 15. There is broad global recognition that the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict is a serious abuse in itself. This is reflected in the fact that no existing international tribunal has ever prosecuted a child for war crimes.

The groups – the American Civil Liberties Union, Amnesty International, the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, Human Rights First and Human Rights Watch – urged the President-elect to drop the military commission charges against Khadr and either repatriate him to Canada or, if there is evidence to support it, to prosecute him in US federal courts in accordance with international juvenile justice and fair trial standards.

The groups also called on President-elect Obama to immediately suspend pending proceedings against Mohammed Jawad, an Afghan who is also charged before the military commissions for crimes allegedly committed when he was 16 or 17. A military judge twice ruled that statements Jawad made following his arrest were not admissible at trial because they were obtained through torture. However, the government has challenged the ruling and the Court of Military Commission Review in Washington, DC, is scheduled to hear arguments on Tuesday, January 13.

To read the letter from the groups to President-elect Barack Obama, please see:
<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/AMR51/002/2009/en>

For Amnesty International's reports on Omar Khadr and Mohammed Jawad, see:
USA: In whose best interests? Omar Khadr, child 'enemy combatant' facing military commission, April 2008, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/AMR51/028/2008/en>.

USA: From ill-treatment to unfair trial. The case of Mohammed Jawad, child 'enemy combatant', August 2008, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/AMR51/091/2008/en>

For Amnesty International's Urgent Action appeal to President-elect Barack Obama, see
<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/AMR51/001/2009/en>.