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USA: Amnesty International requests access to Guantánamo base

Amid growing concern about the treatment of prisoners held at the Guantánamo Bay prison in Cuba, Amnesty International today wrote to the US authorities to request access to the detention camp.

"It is essential that these prisoners are granted access to lawyers and human rights monitors to guarantee that their rights are fully respected," the organization said.

Drawing on its decades of experience and research into the treatment of prisoners and techniques used to elicit information from them, the human rights organisation said that the very secrecy surrounding the prisoners is the most alarming thing about the present situation.

"Keeping prisoners incommunicado, sensory deprivation, the use of unnecessary restraint and the humiliation of people through tactics such as shaving them, are all classic techniques employed to 'break' the spirit of individuals ahead of interrogation," Amnesty International said.

"We simply cannot know whether or not this is the aim of the authorities at the prison because they are shrouding the prison in a veil of secrecy and denying the individuals their rights to see lawyers. What we do know, is that these are illegal techniques used around the world to elicit confessions and other information under interrogation. The USA must allow public scrutiny of the prison and allow the prisoners to see their lawyers."

The organization reminded the US authorities that all persons in detention, including those protected by the Geneva Conventions and other international humanitarian law during an armed conflict, have certain fundamental rights, including the right to a fair trial if accused of any crimes. That right includes the right of persons suspected of a crime to be informed of their rights, the right to access to counsel of their choice, the right to silence without that silence being used against them and the right not to be interrogated in the absence of their counsel. They also have the right to access to a judge able to determine the legality of the detention and to order release if that detention is unlawful. Evidence taken in violation of these rights may not be used at trial.

"Denying prisoners their internationally recognised rights -- including the right to a fair trial -- can constitute a war crime under the Geneva Conventions and other international humanitarian law," Amnesty International said.

The organization added that if the prisoners in Quantánamo are rightly the focus of international attention, the world should not forget the thousands of prisoners held in Afghanistan and the hundreds detained under anti-terrorism legislation in countries including the USA and the United Kingdom, whose basic rights -- including that to a fair trial -- are also being denied.

"We campaign against the violation of prisoners' human rights the world over, whoever is responsible for the violations and whoever the prisoners are. There can be no double standards in human rights -- they are universal and indivisible, and it is only by upholding those principles that real justice can be done," Amnesty International concluded.

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