

Protesters call for closing of illegal U.S. prison at Guantanamo Naval Base

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Washington, January 12 (RHC)-- In Washington, D.C., protesters gathered outside the White House Wednesday to call on U.S. President Joe Biden to close the prison at the U.S. naval base in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. Demonstrators wore orange jumpsuits and black hoods over their heads, marking the 21st anniversary of the reopening of the notorious prison to house hundreds of Muslim men and boys who were captured overseas and handed over to the U.S. Thirty-five men remain imprisoned at Guantánamo today.

In an open letter to President Biden, the ACLU, the Center for Constitutional Rights and over 150 other groups wrote, "The Guantánamo detention facility was designed specifically to evade legal constraints, and Bush administration officials incubated torture there. ... Guantánamo continues to cause escalating and profound damage to the aging and increasingly ill men still detained indefinitely there, most without charge and none having received a fair trial."

Since the chaotic withdrawal of United States forces from Afghanistan in 2021, President Joe Biden and his top aides have repeatedly expressed a sense of achievement that Washington is not at war for the first time in decades.

But not far from U.S. shores, nestled in a Cuban harbor, the Guantanamo Bay detention facility is still operating as a remnant of the so-called "war on terror" that started after the 9/11 attacks in 2001.

Wednesday, January 11th, marked the 21st anniversary of the prison, known as Gitmo – an occasion that prompted renewed calls for closing the centre. Detainees have detailed abuse inside the facility and critics have said basic due process protections were denied there.

"The 'war on terror' will not end until Guantanamo is closed. So any claim that the war is over is false," Lisa Hajjar, a sociology professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara, told Al Jazeera.

Hajjar is the author of the book titled *The War in Court: Inside the Long Fight Against Torture*, published last year. She said the prison's lasting legacy is that the U.S. government – "ostensibly a liberal political democracy" – denied the humanity of detainees in the name of national security interests.

Former Guantanamo detainee Mansoor Adayfi said the detention facility's legacy gets worse with every passing year. "It symbolises oppression, injustice, lawlessness, abuse of power and indefinite detention," he told Al Jazeera.

Adayfi spent 14 years in the prison, where he said he endured torture, humiliation and abuse. Originally from Yemen, he explained he was kidnapped in Afghanistan and handed over to US forces when he was 18. He was accused of being a much older al-Qaeda recruiter but has maintained his innocence.

Adayfi said it was unfortunate that the rights violations at Guantanamo are being committed by a powerful country that preaches democracy and freedom. "They're still keeping men imprisoned for 21 years without rights, without charges, without trial, even without humanity," he said.

The facility once housed nearly 800 detainees but now it holds 35 prisoners – all Muslim men – most of whom have never been charged with a crime, including 20 who have been cleared for release.

On Wednesday, nearly 160 international rights groups sent a letter to Biden urging him to shut down the facility. "Guantanamo continues to cause escalating and profound damage to the aging and increasingly ill men still detained indefinitely there, most without charge and none having received a fair trial. It has also devastated their families and communities," the letter said.

The groups, which include Oxfam America and the Council on American-Islamic Relations, also alleged that the prison stokes “bigotry, stereotyping and stigma”. By exemplifying those social divisions, Guantanamo “risks facilitating additional rights violations”, the groups said.

In a petition to Biden, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), a nonprofit rights group, described the prison as a “global symbol of injustice, abuse and disregard for the rule of law”.

“Guantanamo continues to impose enormous costs to both our values and our resources. It is long past time for this shameful episode in American history to be brought to a close,” the statement said.

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