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MADRID (AFP) — A Spanish judge on Wednesday opened an investigation into an alleged "systematic programme" of torture at the US Guantanamo Bay detention camp, following accusations by four former prisoners.

Judge Baltasar Garzon will probe the "perpetrators, the instigators, the necessary collaborators and accomplices" to crimes of torture at the prison at the US naval base in southern Cuba, he said in his ruling, a copy of which was seen by AFP.

The judge based his decision on statements by Hamed Abderrahman Ahmed, known as the "Spanish Taliban" and three other former Guantanamo detainees -- a Moroccan, a Palestinian and a Libyan.

Garzon said that documents declassified by the US administration and carried by US media "have revealed what was previously a suspicion: the existence of an authorised and systematic programme of torture and mistreatment of persons deprived of their freedom" that flouts international conventions.

This points to "the possible existence of concerted actions by the US administration for the execution of a multitude of crimes of torture against persons deprived of their freedom in Guantanamo and other prisons including that of Bagram" in Afghanistan.

The four former Guantanamo detainees alleged they were held in cramped cells and suffered beatings and other physical and mental mistreatment.

The Palestinian, Jamiel Abdelatif al Banna, said he suffered "blows to the head that caused him to lose consciousness, was detained in an underground place without light for three weeks and deprived of food and sleep."

The decision by Garzon, known around the world for ordering the arrest of former Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet in London in 1998, was unrelated to another investigation by the judge into six officials of the former US administration of George W. Bush over alleged torture at Guantanamo Bay.

Prosecutors this month issued an official request to the judge to drop that probe, arguing that the complaint targets officials who did not have the power to make decisions but who simply "drafted non-binding judicial reports."

Spain since 2005 has assumed the principle of universal jurisdiction in alleged cases of crimes against humanity, genocide, and terrorism. But it can only proceed when any such cases of the alleged crimes are not already subject to a legal procedure in the country involved.

Several human rights groups have asked judges in different countries to indict Bush administration officials over the camp, which US President Barack Obama has vowed to close by January 2010.

More than 800 detainees have been held at the US military prison since 2002.

Some 240 people are still there. About 60 of them have been deemed eligible for release, but the Obama administration is struggling to arrange their transfer to a third country.

The Bush administration had charged about 20 of the detainees on terror-related charges, including two prisoners arrested when they were still teenagers.