

Activists and former prisoner call for Obama to close Guantánamo

By Asaf Shalev

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The second anniversary of President Obama's promise to close the Guantánamo Bay detention center was recognized this week at an event about torture and human rights abuse that continue to take place there.

"There doesn't seem to be an end in sight...as far as we can tell the [Obama] administration has no intention to close it at this point.," Rini Chakraborty, Western Regional Director of Amnesty International USA, said at a panel discussion about Guantánamo Bay human rights abuses Wednesday at UC Berkeley.

That conclusion contradicts the assertion by White House spokesperson Adam Abrams that closing Guantánamo is still a "national security imperative." While the White House says President Obama remains unwavering in his commitment to eventually close the center, more than a hundred detainees remain locked up for years without so much as charges brought against them, according to Chakraborty.

Among those featured at the Amnesty International event was former detainee Omar Deghayes who spoke via video conference from the United Kingdom, where he is a citizen. He spent six years at Guantánamo and was released in what even United States officials eventually considered a case of mistaken identity. He was living in Pakistan in 2002 when one night he was abducted from his home by Pakistani security personnel and later taken into American custody.

"They didn't know anything about us," he said, recalling his first interrogations by Americans at the U.S. detention center in Bagram, Afghanistan. "They never accused us of anything...then every year they alleged something and then realized it is completely false...then the next year they would make something up that was more believable."

What led to Deghayes' release was a deal with the United Kingdom, where his family conducted a wide campaign to pressure British politicians into action. President Obama has made two recent statements about Guantánamo, stressing the importance of and difficulties inherent in closing Guantánamo Bay, but neither statement gave any indication of when the closure would happen.

"[We need to close it] to make sure that we're also living up to our values and our ideals and our principles. And that's what closing Guantánamo is about -- not because I think that the people who are running Guantánamo are doing a bad job, but rather because it's become a symbol," Obama said in a Dec. 22 news conference.

He failed to specify what Guantánamo might symbolize. It is fair to assume President Obama was referring to widespread allegations of torture and human rights abuse that take place in Guantánamo and U.S. facilities all over the world.

Deghayes shared horrid details of his treatment at the hand of U.S. prison guards. He lost vision in one eye in a beating and had his nose, finger and ribs broken in other instances of abuse. "There were physical beatings, interrogations, chains...we were not allowed to speak to anyone for days and months," he said.

He also said other cases were worse than his. "Some died under torture, some were sexually abused, they were raped."

Chakraborty said that Guantánamo's closing would not spell an end to torture and abuses because there is an unknown number of overseas and secret U.S. interrogation and detention facilities. But she called closing Guantánamo "one very important first step," adding that it would "show we have the kind good political will to ensure justice for detainees."

Currently, Deghayes works with lawyers and activists to fight for accountability. “We want help from lawyers in the United States to bring cases [to trial] and help accountability...not just damages to rebuild shattered lives of [former prisoners],” he said.

Next month, the Berkeley City Council will vote on a resolution to welcome Guantánamo detainees who have been released and cleared as not posing a threat. Many such detainees have no country to be released to because of political circumstances. So far, the United States has refused to let these former detainees live in the United States and so a vote in favor of the resolution would have only symbolic value.