



Committee on International Justice and Peace

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October 3, 2017

The Honorable James N. Mattis
Secretary of Defense
Pentagon

Dear Secretary Mattis:

Recent news reports indicate the Administration is considering developing new policies on how to handle terrorist detainees and on the use of the detention facility at Guantanamo Bay. As Chair of the Committee on International Justice and Peace of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), I write to express my concern over possible expanded use of the prison at Guantanamo and over indefinite detention without trial.

Our concerns are not new. For many years we have urged the closing of Guantanamo because it, like Abu Ghraib, has become a symbol of U.S. violations of basic human rights and detainee abuse. The Catholic Church is absolutely opposed to torture, recognizing it as intrinsically evil. The Church supported the previous Administration's executive order banning torture and continues to encourage bipartisan support for legislation to make torture, which some euphemistically refer to as "enhanced interrogation," illegal.

Holding prisoners in indefinite detention without trial is also inhumane. Pope Francis, in remarks to the International Association of Penal Law in 2014, spoke against the practice of detaining "unsentenced prisoners" and of keeping prisoners in isolation for extended periods of time, calling them abuses that are "attacks against the dignity and integrity of the human person." Indefinite detention is not only injurious to detainees, but it also compromises the U.S. commitment to the rule of law and undermines our struggle against terrorism. At a minimum, detainees should have the right to periodic reviews by a board that can examine evidence and recommend whether detainees are eligible for release or transfer. International law requires the right to due process.

We understand there are currently 41 detainees at Guantanamo, down significantly from a high of 780 in 2002. The cost to maintain them at Guantanamo is calculated to be in the millions per detainee. For moral as well as financial reasons, the Defense Department should: expedite the transfer of those detainees who have been cleared, continue periodic reviews of those remaining in Guantanamo, and discourage the assignment of any new detainees to Guantanamo. Our ultimate goal is the closure of Guantanamo – a task that ultimately will require Congressional approval. Be assured that we will continue to work toward that end.

As our Conference of Bishops stated in the wake of the 9/11 attacks: "We must not only act justly but be perceived as acting justly if we are to succeed in winning popular support against terrorism." In our view, closing Guantanamo would be a step in the right direction toward winning global popular support against terrorism.

Sincerely yours,

Most Reverend Oscar Cantú
Bishop of Las Cruces
Chair, Committee on International Justice and Peace