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US 'neglects mental health of Guantanamo inmates'

By Andrew Buncombe in Washington

Campaigners have accused the Bush administration of deliberately ignoring mounting evidence of psychological and mental health problems among prisoners at Guantanamo Bay despite more than 40 previous suicide attempts.

Lawyers who represent some of the 460 men at the prison said no one should be surprised by the suicides of three inmates at the weekend - one of whom was 17 years old when he was incarcerated and another who was earmarked for transfer.

Bill Goodman, legal director of the Centre for Constitutional Rights (CCR), said: "The Bush administration has systematically and deliberately denied these men their most basic rights through a policy of choking off all contact, communication, information and hope."

"[It has] consistently fought to keep these men from lawyers, doctors and others who were willing to help them."

His comments came after a senior US official dismissed the deaths as nothing more than a "good PR stunt". The Bush administration sought to retreat from that position yesterday with Cully Stimson, deputy assistant secretary of defence for detainee affairs, telling the BBC: "We are always concerned when someone takes his own life. Because, as Americans, we value life, even the lives of violent terrorists who are captured waging war against our country."

The CCR provided a precise timetable detailing the efforts of campaigners to raise the issue of suicide risk among inmates as well as the government's tacit acknowledgement of the problem, stretching back to 2002.

There have reportedly been 41 suicide attempts made by a total of 25 prisoners. One man, Jumah al-Dossari, has tried to take his life 12 times.

In 2003, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the only independent organisation granted access to the prisoners, warned of the severe mental health issues facing many and said the nature of their incarceration and interrogation - including humiliating acts, solitary confinement, temperature extremes, use of forced positions - was "a form of torture".



Another CCR lawyer, Gitanjali Gutierrez, said: "The deaths come as absolutely no surprise to the attorneys who have been involved in this litigation."

"Indeed, they do not even come as a surprise to the military, which has acknowledged they were aware some of the men at Guantanamo may try to kill themselves."

The three men - Manei al-Otaibi, 30 and Yasser al-Zahrani, 21, both from Saudi Arabia, and Ali Abdullah Ahmed 33, from Yemen - were found dead in their cells on Saturday morning. It emerged they had tried to conceal themselves from the guards by hanging laundry from the ceiling of their cells and that at least one had arranged his bed to make it appear he was asleep.

The Pentagon described the men as having links to al-Qa'ida, the Taliban and an Islamist organisation that it claims is a terrorist group, but none of the three had been charged. Indeed, the authorities confirmed Mr Otaibi had been slated for transfer to a third country but a lawyer said the prisoner had not been informed.

Even before the suicides, the Bush administration had been facing criticism over the continued existence of Guantanamo Bay. The Supreme Court is expected to rule later this month whether the detainees should have their cases heard in civil courts.

The Labour MEP Arlene McCarthy co-signed a European Parliament resolution calling on the US to set a timetable for closure of the prison. Ms McCarthy, who visited the prison last month, said: "There is a complete failure by the US administration to see why this is not the right way to deal with suspected terrorists."

