

US will move its war court from Guantanamo to Illinois

WASHINGTON: The White House said Tuesday it will move its war court from Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, to President Barack Obama's home state of Illinois, but officials couldn't say how soon or at what cost, and acknowledged they'll need support from Congress to fully implement the transition.

Administration officials declined to estimate how many of the 210 detainees at Guantanamo would move to the Thomson Correctional Center, but White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs said he "wouldn't get in the way of contradicting" an estimate by Sen. Richard Durbin, D-Ill., of about 100 detainees.

A letter to Illinois Gov. Pat Quinn and a presidential memorandum made official the federal government's intention to acquire the largely empty maximum-security facility about 150 miles west of Chicago.

A senior White House official said in a background briefing that the 146-acre prison was the intended site for the latest version of the military commissions trials, meant for war

on terror captives accused of committing war crimes. The official also said the administration intended to transfer any so-called indefinite detainees to the facility, which would require congressional action.

Many Illinois officials and congressional Democrats support the idea, but Republicans cited concerns for Americans' safety, and human rights advocates underscored opposition to indefinite detentions on or off US soil. Others worried Obama is being rushed by the anti-war base.

The latest move comes after nearly a year of obstacles being thrown in the path of Obama's plans to close the military prison in southeast Cuba.

Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., a military lawyer, agrees with emptying Guantanamo camps "if done correctly," but suggested the latest development is more evidence that Obama's team "has lost its bearings in an effort to close Guantanamo as quickly as possible."

"The administration has sent a confusing

message to our troops on the battlefield who no longer know when civilian law enforcement rules or the laws of war might apply," Graham said.

Even advocates of Guantanamo's closure viewed the skeletal plan outlined Tuesday with skepticism, however. "If Thomson will be used to facilitate (detainees') lawful prosecution, then this is truly a positive step," said Joanne Mariner, the counterterrorism director at Human Rights Watch. "But if the administration plans to hold the detainees indefinitely in the Thomson prison without charging them, President Obama will simply have moved Guantanamo to Illinois."

"It will pose no danger to the community," National Security Adviser James L. Jones said Tuesday, while Durbin vowed, "We will never forget 9/11."

On paper, officials said, the facility, first opened in 2001, would be the nation's most secure.

The letter to Quinn said acquiring Thomson

would allow the federal government to carry out Obama's order to close the facility at Guantanamo, where suspected terrorists have been housed since 2002.

Reported abuses at Guantanamo during the Bush administration inflamed Islamic radicals and incurred disapproval from the international community. Obama sought to empty the prison camps at Guantanamo by Jan. 22, but has acknowledged the deadline can't be met.

Of detainees still at Guantanamo, five have been designated for federal trial, with another 25 under consideration. The Pentagon's Chief War Crimes Prosecutor, Navy Capt. John F. Murphy, has said his staff is building war crimes court cases for as many as 55 of the 210 detainees now at Guantanamo.

Separately, officials said they'd also use the portion of the Thomson prison used for Guantanamo detainees - as opposed to federal prisoners - for indefinite detainees, of whom there were nine approved by the federal courts through habeas corpus review, the yardstick a

senior administration official said he'd use.

Two senior administration officials, speaking to reporters on condition of anonymity at White House insistence, said current law would allow Guantanamo detainees awaiting military commission proceedings to be transferred to Thomson and would allow the facility to become the new site for those proceedings.

Guantanamo detainees awaiting prosecution through civilian courts wouldn't go to Thomson but to the jurisdiction where they'd be tried, such as alleged 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and four fellow accused, whom Attorney General Eric Holder have designated for trial in New York. Detainees to be sent to other countries would stay at Guantanamo until leaving the US, the officials said.

As for "indefinite detainees," whom the government likely couldn't prosecute but who are considered too much of a threat to national security to release, administration officials said they'd need Congress to change the law before they could be transferred to US soil. -Reuters

Gaidar, acting PM under Yeltsin, dies unexpectedly of blood clot

MOSCOW: Yegor Gaidar, who oversaw Russia's painful economic transition from communism to the free market in the 1990s, died Wednesday, his aide said. He was 53.

Gaidar's aide Valery Natarov told The Associated Press that Gaidar died unexpectedly, early Wednesday, at his Moscow-region home while he was working on a book. Gaidar died of a blood clot, Natarov said. No other details were immediately available.

Gaidar served under Boris Yeltsin in the early 1990s and was acting prime minister for six months in 1992. He oversaw the so-called shock therapy reforms, subjecting the heavily centralized economy to a juddering overnight liberalization of prices that were formerly set by the state - and introducing the country to the murky privatizations that gave birth to the Russian oligarchy.

Gaidar, a graduate of the economics faculty of Moscow State University, was among a group of young liberal politicians in the 1990s who have in recent years been cast in a dubious light by Russia's current leadership as the architects of the decade's economic and political chaos.

Former associates acknowledged Gaidar as an object of loathing among ordinary Russians who lost everything during the economic liberalization, but they praised him as a man who averted greater catastrophe.

"He stood before the choice of civil war or painful reforms," Boris Nemtsov, a former deputy prime minister under Yeltsin, told the Ekho Moskvy radio station. "He gave his life to avert civil war."

Anatoly Chubais, Gaidar's close associate in the reforms and former deputy prime minister, described Gaidar in his book as a friend and "an intellectual and moral leader for all of us."

"He was a great man," Chubais said. "Russia is very lucky to have had him in one of the most difficult times of its history. ... He saved the country from hunger, civil war and collapse."

Former Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev, who opposed Gaidar's reforms, said in comments carried by the Itar-TASS news agency that he "personally grieves" Gaidar's death. But he also pointed to what he called the shortcomings of Gaidar's policies.

"Gaidar went into politics with many hopes but his plan was to (resolve all the problems) in one shot," Gorbachev said. Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, the leader of the right-wing Liberal Democratic Party, and a contemporary of Gaidar as a State Duma deputy, singled out



Former Russian Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar seen in his office in Moscow, Thursday, in this Oct. 17, 2002 file photo. (AP)

his Gaidar's courage.

"He had courage to stand up for his position that he never concealed. He was a man of great erudition and could answer any question. He made a great contribution to Russia's economic science. I am very sorry that such people die so young," Zhirinovskiy said.

Years after leaving office, Gaidar fell ill on a book promotion trip to Ireland in November 2006, a few days after the poisoning death of former Russian security agent Alexander Litvinenko. Speculation was rife that Gaidar, too, was poisoned. After recovering he pointed the finger at unidentified enemies of the Kremlin.

Gaidar - whose trademark comb-over hairstyle gave him a striking appearance - was part of a renowned family. His grandfather, Arkady, was a famed Soviet author of children's books that remain popular to this day. His father, Timur, was a military reporter with the Soviet Pravda newspaper and fought in the Bay of Pigs invasion. His daughter, Maria, is a liberal campaigner who has been arrested several times for taking part in anti-government rallies and now serves as an aide to Nikita Belykh, a regional governor. -AP

Man arrested trying to enter Berlusconi hospital room

ROME: Italian police have arrested a 26-year-old man who tried to enter the hospital room of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, who is recovering from an attack on Sunday that left him with a fractured nose and broken teeth.

Milan police said the man, from the northern city of Turin, said he wanted to talk to the 73-year-old conservative leader. Berlusconi was struck in the face after a weekend rally when a man with a history of mental illness threw a statuette at him.

Meanwhile, a spokesman for Berlusconi says the hospitalized Italian premier had more pain in the night but enjoyed receiving a phone call from

President Barack Obama.

Paolo Bonaiuti said Wednesday that Berlusconi's pain had "sharpened" a bit, and that an old neck problem was also causing him pain.

The premier suffered a broken nose and two broken teeth Sunday when a man hit him in the face with a statuette after a pro-Berlusconi rally in Milan.

Officials at Milan's San Raffaele Hospital say Berlusconi is expected to be released later in the day.

Bonaiuti said Obama called Tuesday night to offer get-well wishes. -Reuters

Rights court unable to hear Habre petition

ARUSHA, Tanzania: The African human rights court, in its first ever case Tuesday, ruled itself incompetent to decide whether charges against Chad's former president Hissene Habre should be dropped.

The Tanzania-based African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights was hearing a petition lodged in 2008 by a Chadian national, Michelot Yogogombaye, seeking to have Habre's planned trial in Senegal quashed.

The African Union, which established the court in 2006, had in the same year called for Habre's case to be heard in Senegal, where he has been exiled since his toppling in 1990. The former Chadian dictator is facing crimes against humanity charges stemming from accusations of killing and torturing tens of thousands during his rule between 1982 and 1990.

"The court unanimously declares that it is incom-

petent to decide on the petition by Mr Yogogombaye against Senegal," read a ruling.

It added that Senegal had not made any official communication acknowledging the court's competence to hear petitions filed directly by individuals or non-governmental groups.

Yogogombaye had asked the judges to "take note, in the current case made for the inculcation and judgement of Hissene Habre, of the political character, the financial motive and the abusive use of the principle of universal jurisdiction."

Yogogombaye, who lives in Switzerland and who was absent during Tuesday's ruling, had suggested a South African-style truth and reconciliation commission to deal with crimes committed in Chad between 1962 and 2008. -AFP

Canadian premier mulls suspending parliament

OTTAWA: Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper is considering suspending Parliament until March to take some of the heat off the minority Conservative government, the Globe and Mail said on Tuesday.

The newspaper quoted Liberal Ralph Goodale as saying he had heard civil servants were being told to clear the decks before a possible end of the parliamentary session. Goodale runs day-to-day business in the House of Commons for the Liberal Party.

Governments often suspend Parliament after a year or two to get a fresh start, with little debate, though it was highly controversial when Harper did it last December.

In that case, however, he was facing a vote of non-confidence and an attempt by the three opposition parties to replace the Conservatives with a coalition government.

No such move is under way now, but the Conservatives have been facing daily criticism in Parliament over the way Afghan detainees were treated in 2006-07 after being handed over to local authorities by Canadian troops. Criticism of the government becomes subdued without the daily Question Period.

The Conservatives have a solid lead over the Liberals in public opinion polls, but the margin has shrunk in recent weeks.

Harper spokesman Andrew MacDougall declined direct comment. "We don't indulge the (Parliament) Hill rumor mill," he said. -Reuters



Canadian Prime Minister, Stephen Harper (Reuters)

South Africa's ANC battles to rein in young firebrand

JOHANNESBURG: South Africa's ruling party is trying to rein in a young firebrand who is sowing discord among its old Communist allies, threatening President Jacob Zuma's efforts to build unity as the country grapples with economic recession. Fearing the spat may get worse, the African National Congress on Tuesday rebuked Julius Malema, president of the ANC's Youth League, for his attacks against the South African Communist Party. ANC spokesman Jackson Mthembu said anyone who defies ANC orders not to fuel tensions must explain themselves in a disciplinary hearing.

Malema's actions have created a stir because the ANC Youth League, once led by Nelson Mandela long before he became president, is a powerful lobbying group within the ruling party and sees itself as king makers. The hostility has enthralled South Africans, earning banner headlines and prompting endless commentary and speculation on talk radio.

The infighting has put a strain on an alliance between the ANC, the SACP and the country's largest trade union federation that goes back decades, when the three banded together to fight apartheid. Since white rule ended with the country's first all-race elections in 1994, that unity has at times seemed forced. Under then

President Thabo Mbeki, who succeeded Mandela, the alliance was battered by disagreements over the government's market-friendly economic policies. Some observers say the latest tensions are a result of a succession battle that has already started over who will replace Zuma, who was inaugurated only last May. Malema is opposed to the growing influence of communists in the ANC and wants to keep its leaders from rising to power.

Matters came to a head last week when the 28-year-old Malema and some other ANC officials were booed at an SACP conference. After Malema retaliated by sending a threatening text message to SACP Deputy Secretary General Jeremy Cronin, who is also a member of the ANC's executive committee, the committee called for unity, asking that "members refrain from fueling tensions."

But Malema went on to tell the National Press Club on Tuesday that the heckling was an "invitation to war."

The hostility between Malema and the SACP broke into the open months ago after Malema began advocating that South Africa's mines be nationalized - a policy even Cronin opposes for being unwieldy and expensive.

When Cronin, who also serves as the government's deputy transport minister,

called Malema's ideas misguided, Malema retorted that he needed no advice from "a white messiah."

The infighting comes during a period when fewer tensions within the alliance had been expected.

Malema and some other figures from the ANC and the Communist party came together to oust Mbeki and bring in Zuma, but once again relations are fraying.

"The uneasy alliance between these two groupings that united to remove Thabo Mbeki from office and replace him with Jacob Zuma appears to have run its course," noted Ray Hartley, editor of the Johannesburg newspaper The Times. "But as in a failing marriage, things have got a little complicated."

In an effort to build more fraternal relations after he became president, Zuma quickly made SACP General Secretary Blade Nzimande his Minister of Higher Education. There has been some speculation that Nzimande might be considered for the post of deputy president. But with South Africa struggling to emerge from a recession, the new president has had to take a more pragmatic neutral approach on economic policies and go slow on reforms such as greater social spending and looser fiscal policy pushed for by the SACP and the unionists. -AFP

Danish police tear gas climate protesters

COPENHAGEN: Police are using tear gas and batons to disperse crowds of protesters trying to disrupt the UN climate

talks in Copenhagen.

Police spokesman Per Larsen says 230 protesters have been detained in the

clashes outside the suburban conference center.

Television pictures showed a man being pushed from the roof of a police van and stuck with a baton by an officer.

Protesters said they wanted to take over the global conference - and turn it into a "people's assembly."

Larsen said none of the activists had been able to break into the conference center.

The Danish president of the UN climate conference, Connie Hedegaard, has resigned and will be replaced by the Danish prime minister as head of the historic talks.

The change was announced Wednesday as the 193-nation conference enters into a higher phase of negotiations, with world leaders arriving.

UN climate chief Yvo de Boer says Hedegaard will continue to lead informal talks but Prime Minister Lars Loekke Rasmussen will now be the formal head of the conference.

Hedegaard says it's appropriate for Loekke Rasmussen to preside with so many heads of state and government taking part. -AP



Protesters hold signboards during a demonstration in Copenhagen Dec 16. Copenhagen is the host city for the United Nations Climate Change Conference 2009, which lasts from Dec. 7 until Dec. 18. (Reuters)