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Trials of Guantanamo suspects begin without a lawyer or reporter in sight

By Andrew Buncombe in Washington

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Campaigners have condemned the Bush administration's plan to proceed with secret proceedings against 14 "high-value" terrorism suspects currently being held at Guantanamo Bay. The suspects include Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, accused of organising the 11 September 2001 attacks.

The military tribunals, scheduled to begin tomorrow, will take place behind closed doors and away from the scrutiny of the media. Hundreds of previous hearings held to determine the formal status of the prisoners have been open to reporters. None of the suspects will be able to have a lawyer present.

The Pentagon has said that the so-called Combatant Status Review Tribunals (CSRT) are being held in secret to prevent the possible leaking of classified information. But legal campaigners said the decision had been taken to prevent the revelation of information embarrassing to the Bush administration.

"They're not going to let anybody close," said Clive Stafford Smith, of the UK-based group Reprieve, which represents several dozen Guantanamo prisoners, though none of the 14. "They are trying to stop anyone saying anything about the way they have been abused or which countries they were abused in."

The 14 men - three Pakistanis, two Yemenis, two Saudis, two Malaysians, a Palestinian, a Libyan, a Somali, an Indonesian and a Tanzanian - were transferred to Guantanamo Bay last September from secret US "black site" facilities around the world. At the time of their transfer, Mr Bush claimed: "These are dangerous men, with unparalleled knowledge about terrorist networks and their plans of new attacks. The security of our nation and the lives of our citizens depend on our ability to learn what these terrorists know."

In addition to Mr Mohammed, the prisoners include two other alleged senior al-Qa'ida figures - Abu Zubaydah and Ramzi Binalshibh. Mr Mohammed was described in the official US investigation into the September 11 attacks as their "principal architect" and is also accused of involvement in the murder of the journalist Daniel Pearl.

But campaigners insist that without a fair trial and access to lawyers it is impossible to assess what the men may or may not be guilty of. Wells Dixon, a lawyer with the New York-based Centre for Constitutional Rights, which represents one of the men due to go before a CSRT, Majid Khan, said: "This is a system designed to obtain a pre-determined result."

Mr Dixon said that Mr Bush had admitted the 14 men had been subjected to "enhanced interrogation" techniques which he said was a euphemism for torture. He added that under the CSRT rules the government could use information obtained under torture. He added: "You don't know what is true until you have given them a fair trial."

Mr Khan, 26, who was living in Baltimore, travelled to Pakistan in 2002 and was seized by the authorities a year later. The US has accused Mr Khan of having links to Mr Mohammed but his father last year told The Washington Post: "He's a terrorist, my son? No. I don't accept this."

The Pentagon has said that transcripts of the proceedings will be made available though they will be edited to remove information it deemed "dangerous to national security". Spokesman Bryan Whitman said: "[Security concerns exist] given the nature of these individuals and the information that will be necessary as a part of these combatant status review tribunals."

The hearings are part of a process established by the Bush administration as a means of complying with a provision of the Geneva Conventions that requires a prisoner's status to be assessed by a "competent tribunal". Many campaigners argue that the CSRTs, involving a panel of three military officers and a government-provided representative, do not constitute a competent tribunal.

It was originally assumed the hearings would be open to the media, providing the first public appearance of Mr Mohammed and the other prisoners since before their arrests. The only independent visitors to have seen the men are observers from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). An ICRC spokesman, Simon Schorno, said the organisation was bound not to speak about the circumstances of the individuals, but added: "We don't believe there is an appropriate legal framework for these detentions. The lack of a clear legal framework has clearly had an impact on [the prisoners'] mental health."

Campaigners have long been fighting for the prisoners to be brought to trial or else released. They appeared to have won a victory last summer when the Supreme Court ruled that they had the right to challenge their detention. However, the Bush administration passed new legislation to circumvent the ruling.

There are currently 385 prisoners being held at Guantanamo, around 80 of whom have been cleared for release. While Mr Bush says he would like to close the prison his administration pushed ahead with the building of a \$30m (£15.5m) maximum-security prison block, Camp 6, which opened last autumn. Just 10 prisoners have been formally charged.

The main suspects

Khalid Sheikh Mohammed

Allegedly al-Qa'ida's number three, Mohammed is accused of being the architect behind the September 11 attacks. A playboy and a committed jihadist, he has been in US custody since 2003. Raised in Kuwait, the US says he was involved in the 2002 Bali bomb attacks and the murder of the US journalist Dan Pearl.

Ramzi Binalshibh

The nephew of Khaled Sheikh Mohammed is also regarded as one of the key plotters of the September 11 attacks. A former bank clerk from Yemen, he was the first person to be publicly identified as the "20th hijacker". He shared a room with the hijacker leader Muhammad Atta in Germany and was apprehended in Pakistan in 2002.

Abu Zubaydah

Already sentenced to death in absentia in Jordan, Zubaydah was allegedly one of Osama bin Laden's key lieutenants and al-Qa'ida's chief of operations in the late 90s. A Saudi national, Zubaydah has been implicated in the planning of numerous terrorist plots, including the 2000 attack on the USS Cole. He was captured in Pakistan in 2002.