

Beat: Politics

Obama pledges to renew efforts to close Guantanamo

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USPA News - U.S. President Barack Obama on Tuesday pledged to renew efforts to close the Guantanamo Bay detention facility, saying he will reengage with Congress to overcome obstacles to shutting the controversial facility where 100 inmates are now participating in a growing hunger strike. Responding to a reporter's question during a news conference at the White House, Obama said the detention facility in Cuba is not necessary to keep Americans safe.

"When I was campaigning in 2007 and 2008, and when I was elected in 2008, I said we need to close Guantanamo," he said. "I continue to believe that we've got to close Guantanamo." The prison was opened in 2002 in the wake of the September 11, 2001, attacks and remains open despite Obama ordering its closure within 12 months on January 22, 2009. A total of 166 people remain imprisoned more than four years later, and only a handful of them are facing charges. "The notion that we're going to continue to keep over a hundred individuals in a no-man's land in perpetuity, even at a time when we've wound down the war in Iraq, we're winding down the war in Afghanistan, we're having success defeating al-Qaeda's core, ... the idea that we would still maintain forever a group of individuals who have not been tried, that is contrary to who we are, it is contrary to our interests, and it needs to stop," the U.S. leader said. "Congress determined that they would not let us close it," he added. Obama previously pointed to congressional restrictions on the transfer of prisoners from the Guantanamo Bay as an obstacle to close the prison, but observers note that Obama himself has repeatedly signed such restrictions into law. During Tuesday's press conference, however, Obama pledged to renew his efforts to close the facility in the near future. "I've asked my team to review everything that's currently being done in Guantanamo, everything that we can do administratively," he said. "And I'm going to reengage with Congress to try to make the case that this is not something that's in the best interest of the American people. And it's not sustainable." The pledge comes as 100 inmates are now participating in a growing hunger strike at Guantanamo Bay, resulting in the military force feeding at least 21 of them, which is contrary to international standards. Around 40 additional U.S. Navy medical personnel were sent to Guantanamo Bay last week to help handle the crisis, which is now entering its 12th week. "I don't want these individuals to die," Obama said on Tuesday, referring to the hunger strike. "Obviously, the Pentagon is trying to manage the situation as best as they can." Different from the situation at Guantanamo, Obama noted that a number of terrorism suspects have been tried in recent years and are now serving time in maximum security prisons around the country. "Justice has been served. It's been done in a way that's consistent with our Constitution, consistent with due process, consistent with rule of law, consistent with our traditions," he said. But Obama added that he understood why the U.S. government thought there was a need for a special facility like Guantanamo Bay in the wake of the 2001 terrorist attacks, in which nineteen al-Qaeda terrorists hijacked four passenger planes before crashing two of them into the World Trade Center in New York and another into the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. Nearly 3,000 people were killed in the attacks. "I understand that in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, with the traumas that had taken place, why, for a lot of Americans, the notion was somehow that we had to create a special facility like Guantanamo and we couldn't handle this in a normal, conventional fashion," Obama said. "I understand that reaction. But we're now over a decade out. We should be wiser. We should have more experience in how we prosecute terrorists." Laura Pitter, counterterrorism advisor at Human Rights Watch, called on Obama to move swiftly to fulfill his new promises to close Guantanamo Bay. "President Obama's call to end indefinite detention at Guantanamo is encouraging after his long silence on the issue," she said. "Though he blamed Congress for the problems at Guantanamo, there are actions he could have taken and can still take now to end indefinite detention there."

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