

Beat: Politics

2 Saudi detainees released from Guantanamo Bay after 11 years

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USPA News - Two Saudi detainees who were being held at the Guantanamo Bay detention facility for more than a decade without ever having been charged have been returned to their home country, part of U.S. President Barack Obama's ongoing efforts to close the controversial facility. The two men, identified as Saad Muhammad Husayn Qahtani and Hamood Abdulla Hamood, were approved for transfer to Saudi Arabia by six departments and agencies after the interagency Guantanamo Review Task Force conducted a review of their cases, as ordered by Obama in January 2009 with the aim of eventually closing the facility.

The review examined a number of factors, including security issues. "The United States is grateful to the Government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia for its willingness to support ongoing U.S. efforts to close the Guantanamo Bay detention facility," the Pentagon said in a statement. "The United States coordinated with the Government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to ensure these transfers took place with appropriate security and humane treatment assurances." Paul Lewis, the U.S. Defense Department's Special Envoy for the Closure of the Detention Center at Guantanamo Bay, said he is committed to facilitate additional transfers to the maximum extent possible. "The U.S. has made real progress in responsibly transferring Guantanamo detainees despite the burdensome legislative restrictions that have impeded our efforts," he said. Qahtani and Hamood were both suspected to have been members of al-Qaeda but neither was ever charged despite more than 11 years of imprisonment at Guantanamo Bay. The detention facility 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. And while 160 people remain imprisoned nearly five years later, only a handful of them are facing charges. Six detainees have now been released so far this year. Obama pledged earlier this year to renew his efforts to close the detention facility, saying Guantanamo Bay is not necessary to keep Americans safe. "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," he said on April 30. "Congress determined that they would not let us close it," he added at the time, pointing to congressional restrictions on the transfer of prisoners from the Guantanamo Bay as an obstacle to close the prison. Observers, however, note that Obama himself has repeatedly signed such restrictions into law. At least 15 detainees also remain on a hunger strike, down from 106 inmates earlier this year, resulting in the military force-feeding all of them, which is contrary to international standards. The Pentagon stopped providing daily updates on the hunger strike earlier this month, saying the figures serve no operational purpose and "detract from the more important issues."

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Editorial program service of General News Agency:

UPA United Press Agency LTD

483 Green Lanes

UK, London N13NV 4BS

contact (at) unitedpressagency.com

