

Beat: News

U.S. releases 2 Algerian detainees from Guantanamo Bay

-, 30.08.2013, 08:00 Time

USPA News - Two Algerian detainees who were being held at the Guantanamo Bay detention facility in Cuba for more than a decade have been returned to their home country, part of U.S. President Barack Obama's ongoing effort to close the controversial facility, officials said on Thursday. Pentagon spokesman Lt.

Col. Todd Breausseale said Algerian detainees Nabil Said Hadjarab and Mutia Sadiq Ahmad Sayyab were transferred to Algeria on Wednesday and arrived there the same day. Members of Congress were informed about the release prior to Wednesday's transfers. The two men were approved for transfer 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. "Closing Guantanamo remains a priority. This transfer is consistent with that goal," Breausseale said on Thursday. "And, for this reason, we continue to seek a lifting of the current restrictions that significantly limit our ability to transfer detainees out of Guantanamo, even those who have already been designated for transfer." Breausseale said Wednesday's transfers were only possible because they fell within a narrow category of detainees who can be transferred to a country that is not categorically excluded by existing legislative restrictions, and where the security assurances meet the U.S. government's criteria in the restrictions. Cori Crider, Hadjarab's lawyer and the Strategic Director at human rights group Reprieve, welcomed the release and said her client has high hopes for the future. "After a dozen years of needless detention and abuse in U.S. custody, Nabil is embarking on the greatest adventure of his adult life: freedom," she said. Crider added: "He arrives in Algeria weakened from his hunger strike, but with high hopes for the future. He is grateful to the Algerians for accepting him, although he dreams one day of rejoining his family who await him in France. We hope to be able to see him very shortly to help him and the authorities smooth his transition to a free life." Clemency Wells, a spokesperson for Reprieve, said the group hopes Wednesday's "positive step" marks the beginning of further releases from Guantanamo Bay. There are now a total of 164 detainees being held at the facility, of which more than half have been cleared for release. "The Secretary of Defense continues to review and evaluate other Guantanamo detainees for potential future transfers, consistent with applicable law and national security interests," Breausseale explained. He did not indicate whether any other releases are planned for the near future. The Guantanamo Bay 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 164 people remain imprisoned more than four years later, only a handful of them are facing charges. Obama pledged earlier this year to renew his efforts to close to 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 37 detainees also remain on a hunger strike, down from 100 inmates earlier this year, resulting in the military force feeding at least some of them, which is contrary to international standards. Around 40 additional U.S. Navy medical personnel were sent to Guantanamo Bay in April to help handle the crisis, which is now entering its 7th month. In April, Obama also said he understood why the U.S. government believed there was a need for a special facility such as 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."

Article online:

<https://www.uspa24.com/bericht-1389/us-releases-2-algerian-detainees-from-guantanamo-bay.html>

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