

NCC urges closure of Guantánamo center following suicides: Proposes sending delegation to the prison

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The National Council of Churches and its online site FaithfulAmerica.org have reiterated a demand for the closure of the U.S. detention center at Guantánamo Bay, following the suicides of three prisoners there.

“Americans who love their country and its historic ideals are mortified by this continuing blot on our honor, on our steadfast defense of freedom, and on our commitment to democracy and the rule of law,” Robert Edgar, the council’s general secretary, said in a June 11 statement.

In a related issue, when the Pentagon announced June 15 that the 2,500th U.S. soldier had been killed in the Iraq war, FaithfulAmerica.org urged churches to ring bells on the weekend of June 24-25 to honor American dead. “They will toll as a tribute to the fallen and as a plea to the U.S. government to stop this war,” said Faithful America director Vince Isner.

The renewed call to close the detention center in Cuba came after news that three inmates, two Saudis and a Yemeni, had hanged themselves in their cells. The detention center houses prisoners the U.S. has said may have been involved in terrorist activities. Most have been held without charges for up to four and a half years.

The Pentagon expelled reporters from the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Miami Herald* and the *Charlotte* (North Carolina) *Observer* who had reported on the suicides. A Pentagon spokesperson said it had expelled them to be fair to other news outlets, which were denied requests to report from there as detention center officers became busier investigating the suicides and increasing security.

In the most recent NCC statement, Edgar said the suicides were “another milestone in a sordid history of human rights denial and crimes against humanity.” In February he asked Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice for the council to be allowed to send a delegation to the center. She had not responded to the request as of this writing.

Meanwhile, the Paris-based International Federation of Action by Christians for the Abolition of Torture called for the Guantánamo center to be closed and for all detainees to be brought to trial or released. “No democracy should be allowed to disregard international law with such impunity,” said the group on June 13.

In an editorial, the *New York Times* described the suicides “as the inevitable result of creating a netherworld of despair beyond the laws of civilized nations, where men were to be held without any hope of decent treatment, impartial justice or, in so many cases, even eventual release.”

The newspaper also criticized remarks by the facility’s commander, Rear Admiral Harry Harris, who said the suicides were “not an act of desperation, but an act of asymmetrical warfare waged against us.” Such comments, the *Times* stated, “reveal a profound disassociation from humanity. They say more about why Guantánamo Bay should be closed than any United Nations report ever could.” -*Ecumenical News International*