

US charges first Guantanamo inmates

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By Will Dunham

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - The United States has charged two suspected al Qaeda members with conspiracy to commit war crimes, the first Guantanamo Bay prisoners to face criminal charges, the Pentagon says.

The Defence Department said Ali Hamza Ahmed Sulayman al Bahlul of Yemen and Ibrahim Ahmed Mahmoud al Qosi of Sudan were charged on Saturday with a single count each and will be brought to trial before a military tribunal.

Both men have been locked up for two years at the U.S. naval base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, where roughly 650 foreign terrorism suspects are imprisoned.

Human rights and legal activists have criticised the United States for holding prisoners at the Guantanamo base without charges, while excoriating the rules established for the military tribunal trials as rigged to result in convictions. The Pentagon has promised "full and fair" trials.

Pentagon spokesman Maj. John Smith said Pentagon prosecutors do not plan to seek the death penalty against either man if convicted, but said their possible penalty could include anything up to life in prison.

In a statement, the Pentagon described al Qosi as a key al Qaeda accountant and weapons smuggler who was "a longtime assistant and associate of bin Laden dating back to the time when bin Laden lived in Sudan."

The Pentagon identified al Bahlul as a "key al Qaeda propagandist who produced videos glorifying the murder of Americans to recruit, inspire and motivate other al Qaeda members" to attack Americans, the United States and other countries.

The Pentagon said both men have served as personal bodyguards for bin Laden, the Saudi-born al Qaeda leader whom the United States holds responsible for the September 11, 2001, attacks on America.

"You don't get close to bin Laden unless you are very well screened and a key al Qaeda member," a U.S. Defence official said on condition of anonymity.

The Pentagon said al Bahlul and al Qosi were charged with willfully and knowingly conspiring with bin Laden and others to commit terrorism and murder, attack civilians and destroy property.

READY FOR TRIAL

The Defence official said the Pentagon's decision to make these two men the first to face charges should not be interpreted as meaning that they are the most dangerous Guantanamo prisoners.

"It's not necessarily that these are the worst of the worst or the most egregious cases. These are the cases that were ready for charging at this point," the official said.

They are among six men Bush has named as eligible for such trials. Two others also have been given lawyers.

The Pentagon said trial dates for al Qosi and al Bahlul had not been selected, nor had the panel of U.S. military officers slated to hear the cases. The Pentagon is planning to conduct the trials at the remote Guantanamo base.

Two months after the September 11 attacks, which killed nearly 3,000 people, U.S. President George W. Bush authorised military trials of non-U.S. citizens caught in what he calls the global war on terrorism.

These trials before U.S. military tribunals, formally called military commissions, will be the first of their kind since World War Two. Most of the Guantanamo prisoners were apprehended in Afghanistan.

"With this step, the Bush administration confirms fears that it seeks to operate unbound by due process," said William Schulz, executive director of Amnesty International USA.

"These military tribunals fall short of the standard for fair trials, out of step with American values of justice and in violation of international law."

The Pentagon on February 6 assigned military lawyers to represent al Bahlul and al Qosi.

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