

Bishop reiterates call for release of U.S.-held prisoner

SYDNEY, Australia – The head of the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council has reiterated calls for the release of an Australian imprisoned at the U.S. detention facility in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

Bishop Christopher Saunders of Broome, the justice council head, joined the increasing criticism of the Australian government's efforts on behalf of David Hicks, a 31-year-old imprisoned at Guantanamo. U.S. forces captured Hicks in Afghanistan in 2001 and charged him with providing "material support" for the international terrorist organization al-Qaida.

In early February, Australian Prime Minister John Howard said he might have secured Hicks' release any time during the last five years but did not because that "would not be fair" to U.S. authorities.

Bishop Saunders called Hicks' continued incarceration an "affront to human dignity and unacceptable to anybody who holds in high regard due processes of law and human rights in any real democracy."

"In December last year my brother bishops and I called for David Hicks to be given a prompt and just trial or returned to Australia. Well, that time has come – action is required now," Bishop Saunders told Catholic News Service.

Held in solitary confinement, Hicks is now the subject of the retroactive Military Commission Act of 2006. As of Feb. 12, no trial date had been set.

Hicks' military counsel, Maj. Michael Mori, maintains the military commissions are fundamentally flawed, unfair and illegal.

"What is most disturbing is that Australian ministers and the U.S. are saying that Hicks has violated U.S. federal law. If this is correct, there is no reason for Hicks to remain at Guantanamo for five years without a trial in a U.S. federal court," Mori said. "Either Hicks did not violate U.S. law, or there was an intentional decision to deprive Hicks of a U.S. federal criminal trial where he would have had the same

legal protections as a U.S. citizen.”

Bishop Saunders described Hicks, a former kangaroo skinner and soldier, as “a small fish” in the war on terrorism. In light of the release of U.S., British, Afghan and other nationals from the military prison, he said, “it is a great disappointment that the Australian government has not done more to protect one its citizens.”

Australian Sen. Steve Fielding of the Christian conservative Family First Party recently returned from lobbying U.S. legislators for Hicks’ release. He said members of Congress, knowing of Australia’s alliance with the U.S. in the war on terrorism, were shocked by the news that an Australian was being held in Guantanamo Bay.

“Their question was, ‘Why haven’t you asked for his release?’” Fielding said. “Innocent or guilty, Hicks deserve fairness. How long does one have to stay in a hellhole?”