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Khadr video sparks renewed calls for mercy

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Greg Southam/Canwest News Service

EDMONTON -- Omar Khadr's lawyers again called for political action in their client's case on Tuesday, shortly after releasing more than seven hours of video footage showing Canadian officials interrogating the sobbing youth in Guantanamo Bay in 2003.

"It is beyond comprehension that Prime Minister Harper continues to tolerate the treatment of a Canadian citizen in this manner," said Nathan Whitling, acts on behalf of Mr. Khadr with Denis Edney. "It is time for this travesty to stop and for Omar Khadr to come home to Canada to face justice under Canadian law."

The Harper government on Tuesday dismissed the calls to repatriate Mr. Khadr, insisting Canada will let the U.S. military justice process take its course and accusing the opposition of playing "political games" with the case.

Opposition MPs said the footage released on Tuesday underscored the need to bring Mr. Khadr home to face justice here.

"What we're seeing is a severely traumatized man, who at the time of the interviews is only 16," said Liberal Foreign Affairs critic Bob Rae. "With every passing day it certainly becomes clearer to me, at any rate, that he's a Canadian justice problem. We've got to take custody of this young man and try to deal with what we're facing."

Mr. Rae said it is clear that Khadr should be tried before Canadian courts, rather than by the U.S. military tribunal that Mr. Khadr is scheduled to face later this year. "Stephen Harper is now just about the only person in the West who is defending the judicial process at Gitmo," said Mr. Rae.

But the Prime Minister's Office refused to budge. The Harper government has persistently refused entreaties to repatriate Mr. Khadr, emphasizing the seriousness of the charges against him.

"The bottom line is, the government's position has not changed. It's been very consistent, not only over the course of this government, but also the previous government," said Kory Teneycke, the prime minister's chief spokesman. "There's a judicial process to deal with these serious charges that have been levelled against Mr. Khadr, and that process, not a political process, should determine his fate."

Mr. Teneycke argued the governing Tories have simply adopted the policy on Mr. Khadr set by the two previous Liberal governments. He said it was "both dangerous and unhelpful" to have opposition politicians commenting on the case while it is before the U.S. military tribunal.

"It's playing political games on the part of the Liberals. They made the initial decisions that sent us down this track. The tape that was released was filmed and in their hands when they made those decisions."

Mr. Whitling on Tuesday describes Mr. Khadr as being "delighted" in the first day of interrogations captured on tape.

"He believes that if he's co-operative and tells them what they want to hear, they will take him home," he said.

The footage cuts to scenes of Mr. Khadr taken the following day, when the youth -- then 16 years old -- starts breaking down in tears, ripping his tunic over his head and showing his wounds. He breaks down, sobbing uncontrollably for almost 20 minutes.

Mr. Khadr's Pentagon-assigned military lawyer may use the tapes as part of the now 21-year-old's defence in his upcoming trial.

Mr. Khadr is scheduled to be tried before a U.S. military commission in early October on five war crimes charges, including the murder of a U.S. medic in a grenade attack during a 2002 firefight when he was 15.

Mr. Whitling said it is obvious the Toronto-born Khadr was "devastated" when he realized the Canadians were not there to help him but to further interrogate him.

"Contrary to everything the Canadian public has been told of Omar Khadr, the tapes do not show a dangerous terrorist, but instead a frightened, wounded, Canadian boy, pleading for help from Canadian officials," he said. "Instead of helping, they casually dismiss his claims of abuse and mistreatment and tell him they will do nothing for him."

The tapes, along with several reports from Canadian officials and intelligence agents, were released to Mr. Khadr's lawyers after a series of legal decisions this year. The Supreme Court ruled this spring that some materials collected in Guantanamo Bay had to be handed over to Mr. Khadr's defence team. A Federal Court judge decided in late June that the tapes would be part of that package.

The audio in the video, which was secretly filmed through a ventilation shaft, is hard to decipher at times, and the segments are strung together in rough splices.

At times friendly, at times hostile, Mr. Khadr's three interrogators, whose faces are blacked out, make it clear they don't buy his tear-drenched pleas. At one point, just before Mr. Khadr is left alone to sob, a female agent is heard saying: "Put your shirt back on."

Khadr had pulled off his shirt, leaving his shoulders and upper chest bare to show the wounds received during his capture in Afghanistan. He had been transferred from Afghanistan to the U.S. naval base in Cuba the previous October, in 2002.

"I can't move my arms," said Mr. Khadr, voice bordering on weeping.

"They look like they are healing well to me," replies the main interrogator. "I am not a doctor, but I think you are getting good medical care."

"No, I am not; you're not here (in Guantanamo Bay). I lost my eyes. I lost my feet, everything," he said.

"No, you still have your eyes and your feet are at the end of your legs," said the interrogator, after suggesting they take a break. "I understand this is stressful, but by using this strategy to talk to us, it is not going to be ... helpful, we have a limited amount of time. We have heard this story before."

Moments later, Khadr, with his hand over his face, said in a tear-weary voice: "You don't care about me."

The interrogator takes a friendlier tone.

"That is not true, people do care about you."

The interrogator again proposes that they take a break. The female agent tells him to put on his shirt and another agent turns on the fan.

Canwest News Service, with files from Andrew Mayeda

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