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Anti-Guantanamo protesters acquitted in DC court

Tom Roberts | Jun. 14, 2010 NCR Today

A District of Columbia judge today acquitted 24 peace activists who had been charged in January with disorderly conduct and unlawful assembly while protesting the detention of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

According to defendant Kathy Kelly, co-coordinator of Voices for Creative Non-Violence, D.C. Superior Court Judge Russell Canan said the prosecution failed to show that the group?s activities threatened a breach of the peace.

The activists, all of whom represented themselves with the assistance of ?attorney advisors,? engaged in two actions Jan. 21 in separate groups, one on the steps of the U.S. Capitol and a second inside the Capitol Rotunda. Those outside, dressed in orange jump suits and black hoods, carried signs and called out the names of those imprisoned in Guanatanamo. The group inside the Rotunda chanted and prayed while strewing rose petals, according to the defendants and a police report.

Prosecutors claimed that the groups were loud and boisterous. They argued that those outside were demonstrating in an area that is not considered public space and would have been in the way of those leaving the Capitol had there been reason for an evacuation. Those inside, police claimed, disrupted tours underway and blocked an area used by members of Congress.

Atty. Bill Quigley of the Center for Constitutional Rights and a professor at Loyola University School of Law, argued that the activities of the protesters occurred in public space, did not involve disruption or disturbance of any groups and were all ?deeply protected? by the First Amendment.

He said groups ?appeared at the seat of government to address their grievances,? and noted that several U.S. jurisdictions as well as a host of international human rights groups had condemned the existence of the prison and had accumulated significant evidence that prisoners had been tortured, some to the point of death.

He also said the mere existence of the prison, where suspects have been held for years without recourse to legal representation or due process, was a crime in itself.

The demonatration, organized by Witnesses Against Torture, took place on the date by which President Obama had promised the facility would be closed.

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