

American student seeks looser NY prison conditions

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Supporters of an American student accused in a terrorism case asked the U.S. attorney general Tuesday to lift rules requiring him to await trial in solitary confinement under restrictions reserved for the most dangerous criminals.

Letters were sent to Attorney General Michael Mukasey by Syed Hashmi's lawyer, Sean M. Maher, and civil rights groups including the Center for Constitutional Rights, the Brennan Center for Justice and the Association for Muslim American Lawyers.

The letters say special administrative measures normally reserved for the most dangerous criminals seem overly harsh for Hashmi, who is accused of storing luggage for two weeks in 2004 in his London apartment for an old acquaintance who eventually gave the raincoats, ponchos and waterproof socks to a high-ranking al-Qaida member.

The supporters said they feared the isolation will cause lasting psychological, emotional and physical damage to Hashmi.

Federal prosecutors in Manhattan had no comment, spokeswoman Yusill Scribner said.

The Brennan Center for Justice said it feared that extreme isolation being used intentionally or inadvertently might pressure Hashmi into accepting a plea bargain deal that he otherwise would reject.

Maher said in an interview that he shares that fear, especially since his 28-year-old client, who has pleaded not guilty, could face up to 70 years in prison if convicted.

"Many times people charged with crimes that have serious potential sentences will cave in to that type of pressure," he said.

Maher said Hashmi has been isolated for the last year after he was brought from England to the United States to face trial on charges that he conspired to contribute funds, goods or services to the terrorist group.

Hashmi was arrested in June 2006 in the United Kingdom at the request of the United States. He was extradited in May 2007 and has been awaiting a trial scheduled to begin next spring.

Hashmi, born in Pakistan, moved with his family to the United States when he was 3 and grew up in Queens before graduating from Brooklyn College in 2003. He moved to London to study for a master's degree in international relations at the London Metropolitan University.

Hashmi cannot communicate, share a cell or worship with fellow inmates. Any newspapers are delivered with a 30-day delay, he is not permitted to listen to radio or television news programs and he can only be visited by attorneys and immediate family, the groups said.

Last year, more than 550 academics from across the country signed a petition saying they believed Hashmi's pretrial detention conditions were a threat to his right to a fair trial, Maher noted in his letter.

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