

By Daily Mail

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Former U.S. President George W. Bush has cancelled a visit to Switzerland over fears he could have been arrested on torture charges.

Mr Bush was due to be the keynote speaker at a Jewish charity gala in Geneva on February 12.

But pressure has been building on the Swiss government to arrest him and open a criminal investigation if he enters the country.

Criminal complaints against Mr Bush alleging torture have been lodged in Geneva, court officials said.

Human rights groups said they had intended to submit a 2,500-page case against him in the Swiss city tomorrow for alleged mistreatment of suspected militants at Guantanamo Bay.

Left-wing groups have also called for a protest on the day of his visit, leading organisers at Keren Hayesod's annual dinner to cancel Mr Bush's participation on security grounds.

The New York-based Human Rights Watch and International Federation of Human Rights (FIDH) said the cancellation was linked to growing moves to hold him accountable for the use of torture, including waterboarding.

He had admitted in his memoirs and TV interviews to ordering the use of the interrogation technique which simulates drowning.

Reed Brody, a lawyer for Human Rights Watch, said: 'He's avoiding the handcuffs.'

The action in Switzerland showed Mr Bush had reason to fear legal complaints against him if he travelled to countries that have ratified an international treaty banning torture, he said.

Mr Brody is a U.S.-trained lawyer who specialises in pursuing war crimes, including Chile's late dictator Augusto Pinochet and Chad's ousted president Hissene Habre.

Habre has been charged by Belgium with crimes against humanity and torture and is currently exiled in Senegal.

He said: 'President Bush has admitted ordering waterboarding which everyone considers to be a form of torture under international law.

'Under the Convention on Torture, authorities would have been obliged to open an investigation and either prosecute or extradite George Bush.'

Swiss judicial officials have said that the former president would still enjoy a certain diplomatic immunity as a former head of state.

Dominique Baettig, a member of the Swiss parliament from the People's Party, wrote to the Swiss federal government last week calling for his arrest if he came to the neutral country.

In his 'Decision Points' memoirs, Mr Bush strongly defended the use of waterboarding as key to preventing a repeat of the September 11 attacks on the U.S.

Most human rights experts consider the practice a form of torture, banned by the Convention on Torture.

Switzerland and the U.S. are among 147 countries that have ratified the 1987 treaty.