

US LAWYERS battling against torture and other abuses at Guantanamo Bay are braced for George Bush issuing last-minute pardons to protect those in his Administration most closely implicated.

The lawyers' warning came after a senior member of the Bush Administration, Susan Crawford, admitted for the first time that torture had been carried out.

Such pardons could prevent US courts from prosecuting people involved in torture on the Bush Administration's watch, in much the same way that then president Gerald Ford pardoned Richard Nixon in 1974 for crimes he may have committed during his presidency, even though no specific charge had been made against him.

Mr Bush can issue a pardon to anyone he chooses between now and leaving office at midday next Tuesday US time (early Wednesday Melbourne time). But lawyers warned that although such a pardon would prevent officials from being prosecuted in the US, they would face the risk of being arrested in other countries, as was former Chilean president Augusto Pinochet.

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