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Seventeen detainees picked up in Pakistan still in Gitmo limbo

Three from Guantanamo hope to move to Tallahassee if they gain refugee status

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Their apartments lie unoccupied, the jobs awaiting them unfilled.

And for three Chinese Muslims detained at Guantanamo since 2002, dreams of Tallahassee remain just that — dreams. The deal had seemed closed for the 17 ethnic Uighurs (pronounced WEE-gurz) after a federal judge ordered their release this week, seven years after they were captured in Pakistan.

But those plans are on hold after the government challenged the court's right to grant refugee status and release the men directly into the U.S.

Emi MacLean, an attorney for the Center for Constitutional Rights, said the detainees would have been transported to Washington, D.C., where a large Uighur community resides. After a period of adjustment and transition, some would stay in D.C. while three would move to Tallahassee. According to the center, the Uighurs, who are Muslims from Western China, say they fled China because of persecution.

"They're one of the most persecuted groups in China, rivaling the Tibetans," MacLean said. "Except the Uighurs don't have a charismatic leader like the Dalai Lama. They're actually a very pro-American people."

The center's Web site lists profiles for six of the 17 detained Uighurs. The names and places differ, but the stories are remarkably similar. All speak of fleeing persecution. Some are students, some workers, some political activists. But one way or another, they all found themselves in a small Uighur community in Afghanistan.

"They didn't have travel documents or papers so they found this small community where they could work until they could go farther into the West," MacLean said.

Then came Sept. 11 and the subsequent U.S. attack on Afghanistan. The Uighurs say they fled south to Pakistan, where a group of villagers pretended to take them in only to turn them over to U.S. forces for reward money they had read about in fliers distributed throughout the region.

"They were basically sold for bounty," said Kent Spriggs, a Tallahassee attorney who does pro-bono work for several Guantanamo detainees but doesn't represent the Uighurs. "They never had any ties to al-Qaida or the Taliban."

MacLean said they were held in Afghanistan for a few weeks or months before they were transferred to Guantanamo.

"And once you get in Guantanamo, it's hard to get out," she said.

The government realized shortly after their arrival that the Uighurs were not, in fact, enemy combatants. As early as August of 2004, then-Secretary of State Colin Powell remarked that the government was trying to find a place for them but that it was no simple task due to fears that if they were returned to China, they would be imprisoned and tortured.

"The Uighurs are not going back to China," he said at the time.

Nor do they appear to be going to any other country. According to Spriggs, other nations have been reluctant to solve what they see as a problem America created.

Enter the Rev. Brant Copeland, pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Tallahassee. After hearing of the Uighur's plight from Spriggs, Copeland coordinated with 19 other local religious leaders from 14 congregations to sign an inter-faith agreement to help re-settle three of the prisoners.

"I think all the faith traditions involved, Christian, Jewish and Muslim, are all called to express compassion and concern for our neighbors, and these men have been unjustly imprisoned for almost seven years. They're in great need, so it seems to me it's consistent with all the religions to reach out to them.

Not everyone is happy with the agreement. Dianne Berryhill, a design consultant in Tallahassee, doesn't feel like there's been enough investigation into the men.

"I spoke with the pastor (Copeland), and he didn't know anything about these men except what the human-rights group had told him. They said they were escaping from oppression. That may be true, but it's also true that they were caught in an area full of Muslim radicals. I don't feel safe with them bringing anyone that was detained in Guantanamo to our community."

MacLean said she wasn't surprised by such a response.

"There is a stigma around them to be sure," she said. "But what people need to realize is that the U.S. government long ago said they were innocent. They just need someplace to go."
