

Guantanamo

'Distinct' risks if Uighurs were set free in U.S.

Muslim detainees in limbo despite '04 release clearance

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

The Bush administration thinks the 17 Chinese Muslim Uighurs detained at the Guantanamo Bay prison camp should not be released into the United States because they pose a "risk distinct to this nation," according to court documents obtained by Agence France-Presse on Friday.

The potential risks, said the Justice Department, were compounded by the fact "that petitioners were detained for six years by the country to which the district court has ordered them brought."

A federal judge last week ordered that the group be released and brought before him in Washington — a historic ruling in which, for the first time, a court ordered that "war on terror" prisoners detained at the U.S. Navy-run prison in Cuba should be released onto U.S. soil.

The U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia halted the process a day after the ruling, to give the Justice Department time to prepare an appeal.

"Most of these aliens were detained after attending or traveling to terrorist training camps," read the U.S. government's appeal, filed late Thursday.

"The district court's order could also make it more difficult for the government to negotiate with third countries over resettlement."

The group has been held in limbo at Guantanamo — despite being cleared of "enemy combatant" status in 2003 and cleared for release in 2004 by the U.S. government — because officials cannot find a country willing to take them.

The men cannot be returned to China because of concerns they would be tortured there as political dissidents.

The Center for Constitutional Rights (CCR), which has defended many of the Uighurs in court, said Friday that it was a "baseless assertion" that the prisoners were too dangerous to release into the United States.

"It would be ironic if this were true, since the government exonerated these men as long ago as 2003 and has been trying to resettle them with our closest allies since then," the CCR said in a statement.

On Wednesday, the New York Times reported that the Uighur case had become a focus of many Guantanamo critics.

"The true fear is not that they will pose a security threat," Jennifer Daskal, a

counterterrorism specialist at Human Rights Watch, told the newspaper. Rather, if the group was released, they would "serve as living reminders of the administration's mistakes in setting up Guantanamo," she said.

The Uighurs were living in a self-contained camp in Afghanistan when the U.S.-led coalition bombing campaign began in October 2001. They fled to the mountains but were turned over to Pakistani authorities, who then handed them to the United States.

Beijing has urged Washington to repatriate the group, saying they were members of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, "which has been listed as a terrorist organization by the U.N. Security Council."

"China has urged the U.S. to repatriate these Chinese terrorist suspects to China on many occasions," said foreign ministry spokesman Qin Gang last Tuesday.

For years, the United States has attempted to persuade other countries to resettle the group, recognizing that the Turkic-speaking minority has been widely persecuted by Chinese authorities.

Only Albania has agreed to take the Uighurs, welcoming a group of five in 2006, who now live far from their homes with no possibility of returning to their families anytime soon.

The White House immediately condemned the federal judge's ruling last week, saying it paved the way for extremists to demand the same freedom.

The Bush administration fears the ruling could have widespread effects on other cases before the federal courts, with some 250 detainees still held in Guantanamo, many of whom are challenging their detentions.

