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Merkel: Gitmo Must Not Exist Indefinitely

Associated Press
January 8, 2006

BERLIN (AP) - German Chancellor Angela Merkel said Saturday that detention centers such as the one at Guantanamo Bay should not be allowed to exist indefinitely but denied she would demand its closure during upcoming talks in Washington.

Speaking to reporters at a meeting of her conservative Christian Democratic party leaders, Merkel reiterated a statement she had made in an interview to be published in Monday's edition of Der Spiegel weekly: "An institution like Guantanamo can and should not be allowed to exist indefinitely."

The German chancellor insisted the comment reflected only her opinion and said she would not insist that the U.S. detention center at Guantanamo be closed when she meets on Thursday with President Bush.

"That is my attitude and my belief and my opinion and just as I've expressed it here, I will express it elsewhere," Merkel said from the southwestern city of Mainz.

Unlike her predecessor, former Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, who angered Washington by refusing to support the 2003 U.S. war in Iraq, Merkel has cultivated closer ties with the United States. Still, she has insisted German soldiers will not be sent to Iraq.

Merkel, in another apparent shift from Schroeder, expressed concern over the development of democracy in Russia in an interview released Saturday, taking a cooler stance toward Moscow than her predecessor.

"We can't ... transfer our idea of democracy" to Russia, Merkel told Der Spiegel. "At the same time, I confess there are developments that I view as cause for concern, for example the new law against non-governmental organizations."

Merkel's comments come in the wake of the gas dispute between Russia and Ukraine, which saw a brief drop in natural gas deliveries to Germany, and a week before she is to pay her first visit to President Vladimir Putin since taking office on Nov. 22.

Schroeder enjoyed a close friendship with Putin and was often criticized at home for not using his position to help bring about more positive democratic change in Russia.

In December, the Russian state-owned gas company OAO Gazprom named Schroeder chairman of a \$5 billion Russian-controlled venture to build a gas pipeline under the Baltic Sea.

Asked by Spiegel if she would use the word "friendship" to describe relations between Russia and Germany, Merkel underlined her government's more distant stance toward Moscow.

"I think the notion of a strategic partnership is more appropriate," Merkel said. "I think that we don't yet share as many values with Russia as we do with America."

At the same time, Merkel said, Germany "needs good, stable relations with Russia" to ensure the continued flow of natural gas. Germany currently receives 30 percent of its natural gas from Russia.

Merkel is scheduled to travel to Moscow on Jan. 16 for a meeting with Putin.