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Muslim Nations Asked to Take Inmates

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The US is negotiating with Muslim countries to take custody of detainees held at Guantánamo Bay in an attempt to reduce the inmate population at the controversial prison.

Pierre Prosper, US ambassador at large for war crimes, said the US hoped to conclude agreements with the countries, which include Egypt, Kuwait, Morocco and Algeria, within two months. The US is also in advanced discussions with Saudi Arabia on repatriating its 129 nationals.

“The idea is to reduce [the number of prisoners at Guantánamo] to as small a number as possible,” said Mr Prosper.

Human rights groups criticised the move, saying the US was sending detainees to countries that have a record of torturing prisoners. “The administration. . . is trying to wash their hands of the problem,” said Tom Malinowski of Human Rights Watch. “From a humanitarian point of view. . . it is better for them to remain in US custody than be handed over to Saudi Arabia.”

Mr Prosper said the US was still discussing legal and practical details with the Saudis. “Our assurances are that the detainees will be prosecuted as appropriated,” he said.

“We don’t want to micromanage or dictate the process but just want to be sure they will follow their domestic and international law.”

Saudi officials are understood to have assured the US that they will not torture detainees. Instead, they want to “reindoctrinate” them by bringing in moderate clerics and family members to encourage them to stop engaging in terrorism.

The US also wants to release about a dozen Uighur Chinese ethnic Chinese from Xinjiang province where Beijing has been fighting a low-level insurgency for years from Guantánamo. But while the US is planning on returning detainees to Saudi Arabia, which has a tarnished human rights record, it is reluctant to send the Uighurs to China because of concerns they will be tortured.

One senior administration official said that unlike the Saudi government, Beijing was simply demanding their repatriation without any discussion of how the prisoners would be treated.

The administration has so far been unsuccessful in finding another country to accept the Uighurs. Many European countries, including Germany, which has the largest Uighur population outside China, and Sweden, have declined to take them. More recently, the US approached Panama, which also rejected the request.

“We are still working with international organisations and some other countries but there has not really been any movement,” said Mr Prosper.

Separately, lawyers for one detainee this week asked the Supreme Court to block military trials at Guantánamo slated for next month. A US court postponed the trial of Salim Ahmed Hamdan, Osama bin Laden’s driver in Afghanistan, but last month an appeals court overturned the decision.

