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Merkel Urges US to Close Detention Camp.

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Angela Merkel has called for the closure of the Guantanamo Bay detention centre and a different way to deal with suspected terrorist prisoners only days before her first visit to Washington as German chancellor.

Ms Merkel, who will meet President George W. Bush on Friday, also promised to tackle the issue of torture and interrogation at the meeting. But she said she could do so because of the friendship between the two countries.

"An institution like Guantanamo can and should not exist in the long term," she told Der Spiegel magazine. "Other ways and means must be found to deal with these prisoners."

Relations between the two countries were damaged by Ms Merkel's predecessor, Gerhard Schroder, who opposed the US-led invasion of Iraq. But diplomats on both sides of the Atlantic hoped Ms Merkel's arrival would lead to an improvement in relations.

Her call on Guantanamo follows her revelation last month that Condoleezza Rice, US secretary of state, had admitted in private that the kidnap of a German citizen by the American security services was a mistake - something US officials subsequently denied Ms Rice had said.

Although Ms Merkel does not appear afraid of speaking out against the US, many observers see her stance as playing more to her domestic audience than being aimed critically against the US.

The Bush administration has repeatedly said it wants to close Guantanamo in the long term, but the vagueness of its statements has rendered them almost meaningless.

Last June it awarded Halliburton a contract to build another detention facility at the camp and another security fence.

But in the US courts the Bush administration is fighting a tough battle over Guantanamo.

The Justice Department is seeking a dismissal of lawsuits from more than 300 of the 500 or so detainees who are challenging the legality of detentions without trial at the military base in a patch of Cuba controlled by the US since the Spanish-American war in 1898.

The issue of torture also refuses to go away. Yesterday Edward Kennedy, the Democratic senator, castigated Mr Bush for adding a statement to legislation outlawing torture by all US agencies that would reserve the right for the US president to authorise torture in certain cases if he deemed it necessary.

Foreign policy has played a prominent role in the first weeks of Ms Merkel's chancellorship. She helped broker a compromise agreement at the European Union summit last year in Brussels and spoke out over the Russia-Ukraine gas dispute.

This stands in contrast to domestic policy where achievements have been less visible owing to the unwieldy nature of her coalition between the Christian Democrats and Social Democrats. Yesterday tensions over the size of a new growth plan and whether to keep nuclear power stations open longer spilled out into the open.

