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## **Uighurs face return to China from Guantanamo**

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The US may have to consider sending Muslim Chinese prisoners at Guantánamo Bay to China, following failed efforts to persuade European countries to accept them as political refugees, according to a senior administration official.

The Pentagon determined last year that half of the two dozen Uighur Chinese captured in the war on terrorism have no intelligence value and should be released. The US has so far resisted Beijing's demands for repatriation out of concern that they may be tortured once back in China.

Last year Colin Powell, then secretary of state, said the US would not send the Uighurs back to China. But the administration official said efforts to persuade the Europeans - most recently Sweden - had collapsed.

"We don't want to send them to China, and Europe has failed, so we have to look elsewhere and engage the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees," said the official. "If these efforts fail, the US may be forced to reconsider sending them to China."

The US held preliminary talks last year with the UNHCR but has not been in contact with the commission since then, said Ron Redmond, a UNHCR spokesman.

The administration official said the US would repatriate the Uighurs only if Beijing provided "iron-clad" guarantees they would not be tortured. In the meantime, the US will approach Panama, after talks last year, and other Latin American countries about the Uighurs.

"Sending these people back to China would be a violation of the Torture Convention," said Tom Malinowski, Washington advocacy director for Human Rights Watch. "There are no guarantees that could possibly assure a reasonable realistic person that these detainees won't be tortured."

The Pentagon denied that the government was considering changing its policy.

"The US continues to release, or transfer under appropriate conditions, detainees from Guantánamo," said Matthew Waxman, deputy assistant defence secretary for detainee affairs. "Our policy is that we do not transfer individuals to other countries where we believe they are likely to be tortured."

The fate of many of the more than 500 Guantánamo detainees remains in limbo while legal challenges go through US courts.