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U.S. Pressures Germany to Accept Group from Guantanamo

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BERLIN, April 14 (Reuters) - The U.S. government wants to deport a group of Chinese Muslims held at the Guantanamo prison camp to Germany and is pressuring Chancellor Angela Merkel to take in the ethnic Uighurs, a newspaper reported on Friday.

The German daily Die Welt quoted diplomatic sources saying Merkel's government has resisted the U.S. pressure to accept the 15 Uighurs from the restive, predominantly Muslim region of Xinjiang in China's northwest.

"We have no comment on the report," a government spokesman in Berlin said on Friday. Merkel is the only European leader to have publicly called on the United States to close the camp.

The men, who oppose China's Communist rule, are from the region that was known as East Turkestan until it was annexed by the Manchu Empire in 1884. Its Uighur inhabitants, a Muslim Turkic people, want more autonomy; some want independence.

The newspaper report, to appear in the daily's Saturday edition, said Germany was identified as a suitable location for the Uighurs, held since 2002, because another group of Uighurs already live in exile in Bavaria.

The German government has resisted the U.S. pressure so far, the daily said, because it does not want to put strains on its relations with China and fears accepting the Uighurs would be seen in Beijing as a hostile act.

The diplomatic sources told the newspaper the issue was expected to be discussed between U.S. President George W. Bush and Merkel when she visits Washington in May.

Just days before her first trip as chancellor to meet Bush in January, Merkel said in a magazine interview that the United States should close the Guantanamo Bay camp and find other ways to deal with terrorism suspects.

Court documents in the United States said the men got military training in Afghanistan under the Taliban. Military officials said they were learning to fight. The U.S. State Department has tried for months to find someone to take them.

In December, U.S. District Judge James Robertson ruled that the men's continued detention was illegal since they were no longer considered enemy combatants.