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China Demands Return of Guantanamo Detainees

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BEIJING (Reuters) - China urged the United States on Thursday to return Chinese nationals held at Guantanamo Bay after the U.S. Supreme Court declined to hear whether two Chinese Muslims held at the detention camp can be freed.

Washington should "repatriate Chinese-nationality terror suspects held at Guantanamo as quickly as possible", the Chinese Foreign Ministry said in a statement.

Beijing's renewed call to take back the detainees came after two of them, Abu Bakker Qassim and A'del Abdu Al-Hakim, failed to persuade the Supreme Court to review a lower court decision that a federal court cannot provide them any relief.

The two belong to the predominantly Muslim Uighur ethnic group that populates far western China's Xinjiang region. Some Uighurs have campaigned for an independent homeland, often called East Turkestan.

The United States decided last year that the two men were not "enemy combatants" and is holding them while it seeks a third country -- not China -- to take them.

They were captured in Pakistan and have been detained since June 2002 at Guantanamo, where the United States holds about 490 terrorism suspects, including a handful of Chinese nationals.

Their attorneys urged the Supreme Court to decide whether a federal court has the power to craft a remedy for those imprisoned at the U.S. military base in Cuba.

They took the unusual step of appealing directly to the high court after the ruling by a U.S. district court judge who said he was powerless to free them.

The U.S. government has said it cannot return the Uighurs to China because they would face persecution there.

But Beijing has insisted that Chinese nationals held by the United States as part of the "war on terror" should be returned.