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China Demands That Albania Return Ex-U.S. Detainees

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China demanded Tuesday that five Chinese Muslims flown to Albania after release from the U.S. military prison at Guantanamo Bay be turned over to Chinese authorities for prosecution as terrorists.

A Foreign Ministry spokesman, Liu Jianchao, said Albania's decision to accept the five and consider their application for political asylum on a request from the Bush administration violated U.N. conventions and international law. He said China had lodged formal complaints with the Albanian and U.S. governments over the transfer, which occurred Friday.

"These people accepted by the Albanians are by no means refugees but terrorist suspects, and so we think they should be returned to China," he said at a ministry briefing.

China's demand was the latest chapter in a long international struggle over the fate of 22 Chinese Muslims who Beijing said have been held at the U.S. prison in Cuba. The detainees are Uighurs, an ethnic minority from western China's Xinjiang Autonomous Region. They were swept up by U.S. forces in Afghanistan and Pakistan after the Taliban government's fall and imprisoned without charges on suspicion of ties to the al-Qaeda organization.

Chinese authorities repeatedly have sought their repatriation for prosecution as members of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, a group intent on ending Beijing's rule in Xinjiang and classified as a terrorist organization by the U.S. and Chinese governments. Asked whether the 22 were charged with any specific crimes, Liu repeated only that they were "terrorist suspects" associated with the banned Uygur movement.

The Bush administration has refused to comply with China's entreaties, citing fears that the Muslims might be tortured or executed. The State Department said lengthy investigations showed they were not a risk to U.S. security and were no longer of any "intelligence value" to interrogators at Guantanamo Bay. U.S. officials, reclassifying them as refugees, cleared them for release.

Washington refused, however, to let any of them settle in the United States, as demanded by human rights groups. Instead, they languished in prison as U.S. officials searched Western Europe for a country that would take them. But in two years of private diplomatic contacts, the officials found no governments willing to incur China's wrath over 22 men who had become flotsam in the administration's war on terror.

The answer for at least five of them, it became clear Friday, was Albania, a country of 3.5 million that has long been eager to form close military ties with Washington and become a member of NATO. An official at the Albanian Embassy in Beijing, who declined to give his name, said the five Chinese had applied for political asylum in Tirana and that their request was under consideration.

"The United States has done the utmost to ensure that the Uighurs will be treated humanely upon release," the Pentagon said in a statement after the five men flew to Tirana aboard a U.S. military plane. "Our key objective has been to resettle the Uighurs in an environment that will permit them to rebuild their lives."

The statement did not say whether Albania or any other country would take in the other 17 Chinese Muslims believed to remain incarcerated at Guantanamo.

The State Department, in a separate statement, said Albania's willingness to accept the five was "an important humanitarian gesture." But a Chinese newspaper, Elite Reference, had a different interpretation.

"All the countries in the world are reluctant to take in these hot potatoes," it said. "Why would this mountainous southern European country of Albania step up? In fact, it is for economic and military interests. Since the Soviet Union collapsed, Albania keeps seeking to reap opportunities from the American big tree."