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about two
strangers.**June 15, 2009**

Out of Guantánamo, Uighurs Bask in Bermuda

By [ERIK ECKHOLM](#)

ST. GEORGE, Bermuda — Almost exactly seven years after arriving at [Guantánamo](#) in chains as accused enemy combatants, and four days after their surprise predawn flight to Bermuda, four Uighur Muslim men basked in their new-found freedom here, grateful for the handshakes many residents had offered and marveling at the serene beauty of this tidy, postcard island.

In newly purchased polo shirts and chinos, the four husky men, members of a restive ethnic minority from western China, might blend in except for their scruffy beards. Smelling hibiscus flowers, luxuriating in the freedom to drift through scenic streets and harbors, they expressed wonder at their good fortune in landing here after a captivity that included more than a year in solitary confinement.

“I went swimming in the ocean for the first time ever yesterday, and it was the happiest day of my life,” said Salahidin Abdulahat, 32.

Over a lunch of fish and chips on Sunday, they praised Bermuda for showing courage in the face of potential Chinese pressures that, in their view, powerful European countries had failed to muster.

The men were among a larger group of [Uighurs](#) (pronounced WEE-gers) who had fled what they called Chinese persecution of Muslims in western China and spent part of 2001 in a Uighur camp in Afghanistan. They fled, apparently unarmed, when the Americans bombed the camp, and were later turned in to the authorities by Pakistani villagers in return for an American bounty.

The four brought here, like 13 other Uighurs still at Guantánamo but expected to depart soon to other destinations, had been cleared by American officials and courts of taking up arms against the United States or ties to global terrorism.

But proposals to resettle them in the United States caused a political furor that the Obama administration did not want to aggravate. On Sunday, these four expressed a surprising lack of bitterness toward the United States, saying — as they had during interrogations years ago in Guantánamo — that they had never been anti-American and just wanted to get on with their lives.

“Before we were asking, ‘Why are the Americans doing this to us?’ ” said Mr. Abdulahat. Now, he said, with others nodding in agreement, “We have ended up in such a beautiful place. We don’t want to look back, and we don’t have any hard feelings toward the United States.”

While two of the men speak some English, all spoke in Uighur, aided by a Uighur woman who has translated at Guantánamo for them and for their lawyers.

Their resettlement on this British colony, known for yachting and pastel buildings, is a small step toward the administration's aim of closing down Guantánamo by January. It has created a political tempest for the premier of Bermuda, who some say acted in an autocratic manner, and angered Britain's Foreign Office, which is in charge of foreign policy and says it was not properly consulted.

But most objections voiced here concerned the secrecy of the deal rather than fears of having former terrorist suspects at large, as some have expressed in the United States. No quid pro quo has become public.

While some less affluent residents said they felt it was unfair to offer jobs and citizenship to men the United States itself would not take, many others shrugged and expressed pride at Bermudan hospitality. As the men venture from the seaside cottage where they temporarily live until they get jobs and figure out next steps, people often come up to shake their hands and wish them well, and the men said they were deeply touched.

Their homeland of Xinjiang, a largely Muslim region in western China where many residents chafe under Chinese rule, is landlocked, and many of the Uighur detainees saw an ocean — still a distant, mysterious presence — for the first time ever through fences at Guantánamo.

Now they can play in the waters. Khaleel Mamut, 31, said he went fishing on a boat on Saturday and caught his first fish ever. "I was so excited," he said. "You just drop the hook in the water and you get a fish." Hearing that fishing did not always bring such quick results, one of the other men quipped that perhaps the fish were joining in Bermuda's welcome.

They have been promised work visas and, in perhaps a year or so, possible citizenship, their American lawyers said. That would give them passports and a right to travel.

"The intent is that they shall become Bermudians," said Maj. Gen. Glenn W. Brangman, a retired officer appointed by the government to help the new arrivals and who greets them with hearty bear hugs.

Under the current arrangement, Bermuda will not allow the men to visit the United States. It is unclear whether they will ever be able to do so even if they gain Bermuda citizenship.

The four said they wanted nothing to do with their ostensible home country of China, which has demanded their repatriation and would almost certainly imprison them.

During interrogations at Guantánamo, these four and other Uighurs said they had ended up in Afghanistan after fleeing Chinese persecution and had wanted to work for the "liberation" of the Uighur people — a position regarded as treason in China.

Many said they had been shown how to fire a Kalashnikov rifle at the Uighur encampment, but had no real training, knew nothing of [Al Qaeda](#), and did not fight the Americans or consider them the enemy.

These four were among a larger group that hid in mountain caves near Jalalabad after their camp was bombed by American forces in late 2001. Hungry, frightened and unarmed, they made their way to Pakistan, where villagers turned them in to the authorities in exchange for American reward money.

Years into their captivity, American officials concluded that the men should not be considered enemy combatants. Last October, a court ordered their release, but it was delayed by the inability to find a host

country and a court reversal that prevented their move to American soil.

In 2007, five Uighurs were sent to Albania. Negotiations are under way to send all or most of the remaining 13 to the Pacific island of Palau.

Bermudans awoke Thursday to learn that the four had been flown in before dawn, with Premier Ewart F. Brown, who had negotiated in secret with the Americans, calling this “the right thing to do.” Opponents, who already regarded Mr. Brown as autocratic, called for a vote of no confidence, which could occur in weeks.

At the same time, the British governor here expressed his displeasure at being kept in the dark, and the British Foreign Office complained to Washington.

Mr. Brown’s fate may be uncertain, but when confronted with the four men in the flesh, many residents seem to warm to them.

Washington has walked a thin line in the handling of the Uighurs. It sought China’s support in antiterrorism efforts after the Sept. 11 attacks, branded an obscure Uighur independence group as terrorist and in 2002 allowed Chinese officials into Guantánamo to interrogate Uighur captives. The four men released here said that interrogation was a low point of their Guantánamo incarceration, with Chinese officials questioning them for long hours without food and threatening them and their families.

From the men’s own statements, it is clear that their presence in Afghanistan was linked to their animosity toward China. Whatever they might have wished in 2001, there is no evidence they sought to become part of a global jihad.

Now, over Chinese objections, the men are being released to third countries.

All that seems distant, the men said Sunday as they pondered, with some pleasure, the unexpected new turn in their lives.

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