

Guantanamo must be shut: Merkel

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Berlin: German Chancellor Angela Merkel said on Saturday that detention centres such as the one at Guantanamo Bay should not be allowed to exist indefinitely, but denied she would demand its closure during upcoming talks with US President George W Bush in Washington. Her visit to Washington will be her first since taking office in November.

Speaking in Berlin to reporters at a meeting of leaders in her conservative Christian Democratic Party, Merkel reiterated a statement she had made in an interview to be published in Monday's edition of Der Spiegel weekly: "An institution like Guantanamo cannot, and should not, be allowed to exist indefinitely." She added: "Different ways and means must be found for dealing with these prisoners."

The German chancellor insisted her comments to Der Spiegel reflected only her opinion and said she would not insist that the Guantanamo detention centre be closed when she meets on Thursday with Bush. "That is my attitude and my belief and my opinion and just as I've expressed it here, I will express it elsewhere," Merkel said from the southwestern city of Mainz. "My talks with leaders of other countries don't consist of my expressing demands, but of exchanging views."

Policy Shift On US, Russia

Unlike her predecessor, former chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, who angered Washington by refusing to support the 2003 US war in Iraq, Merkel has cultivat-



But, Seeking Closer Ties With The US, German Leader Won't Demand Closure Of Prison During Her First Visit To Washington

ed closer ties with the US. Still, she has insisted German soldiers will not be sent to Iraq.

The chancellor told Der Spiegel she expected to speak to Bush about the fight against terrorism. "But I want to accentuate that our relationship with the US will not be reduced to talking about fighting terrorism and the Iraq war," she said. Merkel's Social Democrat partners in the coalition government welcomed her condemnation of Guantanamo. "The Guantanamo camp must be closed. The Guantanamo system was, and still is, bad," said the party's parliamentary leader Walter Kolbow. "It was and remains in contradiction with the agreements and standards of international law."

Human rights campaigners have expressed growing concern about the treatment of inmates at Guantanamo. The Bush administration has denied allegations of abuse at Guantanamo, insisting

it does not torture prisoners.

Merkel, in another apparent shift from Schroeder, expressed concern over the development of democracy in Russia. "We can't... transfer our idea of democracy" to Russia, Merkel told Der Spiegel. "At the same time, I confess there are developments that I view as cause for concern, for example the new law against non-governmental organisations."

Merkel's comments come in the wake of the gas dispute between Russia and Ukraine, which saw a brief drop in natural gas deliveries to Germany, and a week before she is to pay her first visit to Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Merkel described relations with the US as a friendship, but said the term strategic partnership would be more fitting to describe Germany's relationship with Moscow. "I don't think we share as many of the same values yet with Russia as we do with the United States," she said. Agencies