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Greece will free plane spotters on £9,000 bail

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TWELVE plane-spotters detained in Greece a month ago on suspicion of spying will be released on bail today, provided that they can each raise a £9,000 surety.

Their relatives were doing "everything possible" yesterday to find the money while looking forward to seeing them back in Britain in time for Christmas.

They said that they were delighted by the decision to drop the spying charges, but were disappointed that the 12 will have to return to Greece next year for trial on a lesser charge.

Three judges sitting in Kalamata threw out a recommendation by the public prosecutor that the group be tried for espionage. They reduced the charge to one of misdemeanour, based on the collection of illegal information.

It is unlikely that the group will have to return to prison when they go back to Greece next year. Even if they are found guilty they will probably be fined or deemed to have spent enough time in custody.

Ioannis Nikiteas, the lawyer acting for the group, said yesterday: "The judges could not discover proof that they were carrying out a specific espionage act for a foreign power. Without that, the spying charge cannot stick. We are very pleased, as this was our objective all the way through."

The Greek authorities investigating the case contacted their counterparts in Turkey over the weekend to demand that they disclose any information they had about Paul Coppin, the leader of Touchdown Tours. Reports that he travelled to an airshow in Turkey as a guest of the military in May did not help the group's case. The Greek courts refused to believe that Mr Coppin, 45, had not been collecting information for Greece's enemy.

The tour group were arrest-

ed at an air show in Kalamata on November 8 after a guard accused them of "walking suspiciously" through a military area. They were later found to have notebooks and diaries containing details of military movements at the Megara airbase 50 miles west of Athens, to which civilian access is prohibited.

Despite appeals by Jack Straw, the Foreign Secretary, the Greek Government was helpless to intervene. Tony Blair was due to raise the matter personally with his Greek counterpart, Costas Simitis, at the European Union summit at Laeken this weekend.

The plane-spotters were not informed of the court's decision until six hours after it had been made public.

Dierdre Bowden, Mr Coppin's sister-in-law, said: "We are so relieved that they are finally going to be released. We are now going to concentrate on getting the money for the two members of our family involved. We have asked all the relatives to chip in with whatever they have and we are hoping the Foreign Office might help us with the rest."

Her nephew, Stephen Warren, said that he was "disgusted" that they had been charged with anything at all. "It sounds to me like the Greek authorities are holding them to ransom, when there is no evidence against them," he said.

Consular staff in Greece were said to be "working hard" yesterday to resolve the matter as quickly as possible.

They expect that Lesley Coppin, 51, the only woman in the group, will be able to leave the Korydallos high-security prison today and that the remaining 11 Britons and two Dutchmen being held at Nafplion Prison in Athens will be released soon afterwards. They should all be home by Friday.

Mr Straw said: "Like everyone else I was greatly relieved to hear this news. I very much hope they will return to Britain well before Christmas."