

Plane spotters in spying case to go free today

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BY SEAN O'NEILL
IN ATHENS
AND NEIL TWEEDIE

THE British plane spotters held in Greece for more than a month on suspicion of espionage are expected to be released today after being granted bail.

The 11 men and one woman could return to Britain as early as tonight after a Greek tribunal dropped the spying charges and authorised bail of £9,600 each.

But they will still be required to return to Greece next year to face less serious allegations that they collected military information without authorisation. The offence carries a five-year sentence.

Peter Norris, one of the detainees, expressed his relief at the decision last night.

Speaking from prison in Nafplion, Mr Norris, from Uxbridge, west London, said: "Everyone is pretty relieved. It's just a matter of getting the

money together. We have had 35 nights in prison. I don't think we'll be coming back on holiday in a hurry."

Most concern has focused on Lesley Coppin, whose husband Paul organised the one-week plane spotting trip through his company, Touch-down Tours.

Mrs Coppin, 51, a grandmother from Mildenhall, Suffolk, was sitting in the party's minibus minding their cameras when she was arrested.

She was said to have suffered weight loss and an asthma attack while being held in a women's prison near Piraeus notorious for its conditions.

Donald Holder, the British consul in Athens, said: "It would be nice to say that she greeted the news with great happiness, but she was actually rather low. We are hoping she will be able to return home in the very near future."

There was some doubt about how the party, many of

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Bail for Britons

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whom have low-paid jobs, will raise the bail money. Some of their employers are believed to have offered varying degrees of help.

Two Dutchmen arrested with the Britons are assured of release, having been offered secured loans by their embassy in Athens. The Foreign Office, however, declined to do the same.

Jack Straw, the Foreign Secretary, said he was "greatly relieved" to hear the news but said that Foreign Office policy prevented the issuing of loans.

The group was arrested on Nov 8 during an air display at a Greek air force base near Kalamata on the Peloponnese. The local prosecutor alleged that they had taken photographs and notes without permission at Kalamata, then concealed similar activity at a second base at Megara.

Even the intervention of Tony Blair and a string of ministerial conversations failed to sway the Greek government, which refused to intervene in the judicial process.

The group faces heavy legal fees but have been assured of free passage back to Britain by the airline EasyJet.

Plane-spotters to fly home as judge grants £9,000 bail

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BY MATTHEW BEARD

THE TWELVE British plane-spotters held in a Greek jail for more than a month on spying charges are expected to fly home today after a panel of judges agreed to grant them bail for £9,000 each.

Prosecutors in the town of Kalamata, where the group were arrested on 8 November after taking photographs at an airbase, reduced the charges from espionage to a misdemeanour – the collection of illegal information – which carries a maximum two-year jail term.

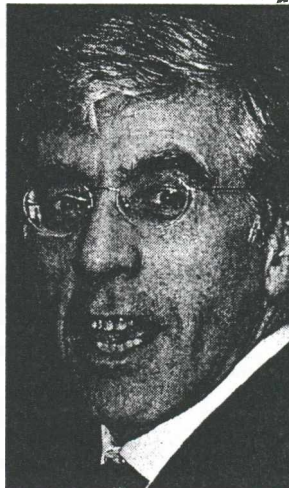
The Foreign Secretary, Jack Straw, who met his Greek counterpart Georges Papandreou earlier this week to appeal for their swift release, said he was “greatly relieved” at the news. He added: “We will now have to work hard to ensure this judicial decision does mean the speedy release from custody of those currently being held.”

The Labour MEP, Richard Howitt, who visited Greece last month to lobby for the planespotters’ release, said yesterday’s ruling was a victory and he expected the case to collapse in court. He also claimed to have discovered a legal precedent involving Dutch plane spotters accused by the Greek authorities of spying who were spared a return to the country when they were handed a suspended sentence.

He added: “A key plank of the defence strategy was to arrive at the lesser offence of misdemeanour, which basically just means they may have unwittingly broken a few local rules.”

As the 12 Britons, and two Dutchmen arrested with them, spent what they hoped was their last night in jail, relatives attempted to raise what some experts considered an unduly large bail. In a bid to secure the earliest release, relatives have accepted donations from Domino’s Pizza, budget airline easyJet, an unnamed company employing one of the accused and a national newspaper which campaigned for their release.

The case has tested relations between Britain and Greece and brought into focus the arcane activities of plane-spotters. Nearly two weeks after the Britons were imprisoned, the Greek air force submitted evidence supporting claims of espionage, prompting discussions a day later between Tony Blair and his Greek counterpart Costas Simitis. Simmering tensions between Greece and



Jack Straw: Was greatly relieved at the decision

Turkey further complicated the case when it was alleged that planespotter Paul Coppin, whose Suffolk-based company Touchdown Tours organised the trip, was a guest of the Turkish armed forces last May. Concerns were raised last week that the accused may be in prison over Christmas but their lawyer, Yannis Zacharias, said a delay to the hearings, announced on 7 December, hinted the prosecution was considering more lenient options.

Yesterday, Mr Zacharias said: “We are very pleased as this was our objective all the way through. The judges accepted the argument of the defence that if they had committed anything at all it is a misdemeanour and amended the charges to that for all of them.”

Reaction from the relatives was mixed. Stephen Warren, the son of Lesley Coppin, the only woman being held, attacked the decision as “disgusting”. He said: “I do not understand why they have been charged with misdemeanour when there is no evidence against them. It sounds to me like the Greek authorities are holding them to ransom. I think the decision is disgusting – there is no valid alternative to releasing them.”

Maria Kennedy, of Buckingham, the sister of one of the men held, Antoni Adamiak, 37, said: “I am just desperate to get him home. I just want to know now what I need to do practically and what I need to do about this money.”

“I am very relieved and this sounds more optimistic news – although I haven’t heard anything official yet. I won’t really believe it until he is back and I can see him.”