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Greek court says British tourists were spies

By Warren Hoge
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LONDON: A group of British tourists pursuing a hobby of plane-spotting, a pastime as peculiar to Britain and incomprehensible to foreigners as playing cricket and drinking warm beer, found themselves convicted in a Greek court Friday on charges of spying.

Judge Potoula Fotopoulou in Kalamata, an olive-growing seaside town in southern Greece, showed no sympathy for the tourists' argument that they were participating in an innocent, if eccentric, sport. She found eight of the group guilty of "illegally obtaining state secrets" and six others guilty of aiding them.

The first group was sentenced to three years in jail and the second to one year, but she promptly suspended all the sentences and said everyone was free to leave Greece.

"I didn't think this could happen in the 21st century in a European country," one of the men, Michael Bursell, 47, of Hull in northeastern England, said on hearing the verdict. Reactions in Britain ranged from incredulity to outrage. Brian Jenkins, Labor member of Parliament whose constituent, Wayne Groves, 38, of Tamworth in Staffordshire, was among the guilty, said, "This is a farce, or rather a Greek tragedy."

Plane-spotting, and its humbler relative, train-spotting, attract thousands of devotees in Britain. Men and women in windbreakers and tweed caps can be seen at the ends of railroad station platforms with their notebooks and pencils or lined up like soccer spectators alongside landing strip fences at major airports with their binoculars and listening devices, recording with deliberation and the occasional moment of jubilation the serial numbers and models of locomotives and aircraft.

The 14 plane-spotters, two of whom are Dutch, were arrested in November at a military base airshow to which they had been invited. They were originally charged with the more serious crime of espionage, which carries a 20-year sentence, and held in prison for five weeks. After a flurry of diplomatic exchanges between London and Athens, they were released on bail and the charges were reduced to "obtaining national secrets."

Before being arrested, the group had toured seven Greek airbases, two aircraft museums and a plane scrapyard. Greece strictly bans photography of military installations, and officials there said suspicions were aroused that the visitors were collecting information for neighboring Turkey, Greece's historic enemy.

They had returned this week to clear their names, confident that Britain and Greece, both members of the European Union and allies in NATO, would have worked out a face-saving way to end the encounter. "Greece was supposed to be the birthplace of democracy and justice," said Julie Wilson, the wife of another of the convicted men, Christopher Wilson, 46, from Gatwick in West Sussex.

Downing Street said Friday night that Prime Minister Tony Blair was closely following the events. "The government has always believed that the response to this case has been disproportionate," a spokesman said. Nikos Papadakis, the spokesman for the Greek Embassy in London, countered, "By all accounts, it was a fair trial."

Stephen Jakobi, director of Fair Trials Abroad, said the verdict could have wide repercussions. "I've forecast all along that if the Greeks got this one wrong, the shock waves would be felt throughout Europe."