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United States rules out death penalty for British terror case suspect

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LONDON - The United States has promised not to seek the death penalty for a British man accused of soliciting support for terrorism and of trying to set up a terrorist training camp in Arizona, according to a document read in court Monday.

Computer expert Babar Ahmad, 30, was indicted in Connecticut in October on charges of supporting terrorism, conspiring to kill Americans and laundering money. U.S. authorities are seeking to have him extradited to stand trial in the United States.

A diplomatic note from the U.S. Embassy to British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, which was read during a hearing at Bow Street Magistrates Court, promised that Ahmad would receive the "full panoply of rights and protections" offered to defendants under U.S. law.

The note also promised that Ahmad would not be tried by a military tribunal or classified as an "illegal combatant," a category applied to prisoners at Guantanamo Bay.

"You can't simply say to a court, 'Here is an unsigned document stamped by the U.S. Embassy _ that's it,'" defense attorney Edward Fitzgerald said.

"The question is whether the assurances contained in the diplomatic note are effective," Fitzgerald added.

Ahmad is accused of running several Web sites, including Azzam.com, which investigators say was used to recruit al-Qaida, Taliban and Chechen rebel fighters and to outfit them with gas masks, night-vision goggles and camouflage gear.

Ahmad's case is being heard under contentious "fast track" extradition procedures that came into effect in January 2004. The new rules lessen the burden of proof in some cases, allowing certain countries, including the United States, to provide "information" rather than evidence that a crime has been committed.