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British Government Asks U.S. to Free British Resident Held at Guantanamo Bay

Associated Press
April 20, 2006

LONDON (AP) - The British government said Thursday that it had formally asked the United States to release a long-term British resident held at Guantanamo Bay.

The Foreign Office said Foreign Secretary Jack Straw had recently written to U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice asking that Bisher al-Rawi be returned to Britain.

Iraq-born al-Rawi, 37, who had lived in Britain since 1985, was arrested in Gambia in 2002 along with his Jordanian business partner Jamil el-Banna. Both men were later sent to Guantanamo Bay.

They were alleged to have been associated with al-Qaida through their connection with the radical Muslim cleric Abu Qatada. Their lawyers claim that contact was approved and encouraged by British intelligence, to whom al-Rawi supplied information about the cleric.

Last month lawyers for al-Rawi, el-Banna and Libyan-born Omar Deghayes went to court to try to force the government to intercede on their behalf.

British officials have secured the release of all nine British citizens held at the U.S. prison camp in Cuba. But it contended that six long-term residents detained there had no legal right to the assistance available to British citizens.

Last month the government changed its position on al-Rawi, saying it would intervene on his behalf because his circumstances were different from the other claimants. Officials refused to say why al-Rawi's case was exceptional, but his lawyers believe it is due to his links with British intelligence.

A Foreign Office spokesman said Thursday that the request to free al-Rawi was made "on the basis of shared counterterrorism issues with the United States." He would not elaborate.