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Australian Guantanamo Detainee Arrives Home

Reuters
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SYDNEY - Australian terror suspect Mamdouh Habib arrived home in Sydney on Friday after being released from U.S. detention at Guantanamo Bay, where he was held for almost three years on suspicion of having links to al Qaeda.

Habib was held on suspicion he helped Osama bin Laden's militant al Qaeda network after being arrested crossing from Pakistan into Afghanistan three weeks after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks in the United States.

But the United States failed to find enough evidence to charge Habib and he arrived in Sydney in an Australian government chartered business jet at about 3:30 p.m. (11:30 p.m. EST Thursday) on Friday.

Television images showed Habib wearing a white T-shirt, jeans and carrying a jacket as he stepped off the aircraft. Looking thin and with a long beard, he shook hands with an official on the tarmac.

Shortly after arriving in Sydney, Habib was taken on a second plane to an unknown destination for a private family reunion.

Attorney General Philip Ruddock said Habib's family wanted a private meeting, away from the media.

"He's not in custody, he's at liberty, and the exact whereabouts are really a matter for him and his family," Ruddock told Australia's Sky television.

"I believe he was in good health. He certainly wasn't shackled on the trip," Ruddock said.

Habib's supporters will hold a public welcome-home party for Habib in a suburban park in western Sydney on Saturday.

"Many who have opposed his arrest, imprisonment and torture over the years will be joining the welcoming party," said Marlene Obeid, who has campaigned for Habib's release.

"We believe he is innocent of all charges and that he deserves justice," she said.

Habib has said he was tortured for six months in Egypt from late 2001 before he was sent to Guantanamo Bay, a U.S. military base on Cuba.

The United States has denied prisoner abuse allegations and the State Department has said it believes Guantanamo detainees were treated humanely.

NO CHARGES

Four Britons freed from the U.S. naval base at Guantanamo Bay this week were detained on arrival back in Britain, but released without charge.

Australia has said Habib would not be investigated for any offence at home as it was not a crime in Australia to be involved with al Qaeda in 2001.

New anti-terror laws have since been introduced to outlaw being a member of, training with, funding or associating with organizations Australia regards as terror groups, like al Qaeda.

But Australia still regards Habib as a security concern and will keep him under strict surveillance.

"There are restrictions on his travel," Ruddock said.

"The United States certainly had an expectation that he'd be returned to Australia and wouldn't be able to return to, essentially, the war on terror. They certainly didn't want to see him turning up again in Pakistan or Afghanistan."

Australian Prime Minister John Howard has said Habib will not receive compensation or an apology for his detention in Cuba and under Australian criminal law is unlikely to be able to sell his story of inside Guantanamo Bay to the media.

"He's free to tell his story as he sees fit but we are looking at the issue of whether or not he can profit from that," Ruddock said.

Australian David Hicks, a 29-year-old convert to Islam, is still being held in Guantanamo Bay, after being arrested in Afghanistan in late 2001. Hicks is one of four Guantanamo prisoners facing criminal charges.