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Deal may be close on French detainees

U.S. agrees to hand over three held in Cuba, judicial officials say

Associated Press

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PARIS – The United States has agreed to hand over to France the last three French detainees at the U.S. naval base at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, judicial officials and their lawyers said Tuesday. The French Foreign Ministry, however, said talk of a deal was premature.

The judicial officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the agreement was finalized just as Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was coming to Paris for talks Tuesday with President Jacques Chirac and his foreign minister.

Her visit is part of efforts between the historic allies to repair ties strained over Iraq. They also have been at odds over fighting terrorism.

The date of the handover of Mustaq Ali Patel, Ridouane Khalid and Khaled Ben Mustafa has not been finalized, but their return is expected soon, the judicial officials said.

"Things are headed in the right direction, and we are now discussing the details," said William Bourdon, an attorney for Mr. Ali Patel, who has both French and Indian nationality.

"The political accord is there. We are waiting for them impatiently," said Paul-Albert Iweins, attorney for Mr. Khalid.

But Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Cecile Pozzo di Borgo said she could not confirm a deal.

"I don't have any elements that would allow me to confirm that deal," she said. "Let's wait for the talks to take place; we will see which subjects are brought up."

The judicial officials said the three were expected to go before judges, and they could be held pending investigation under the preliminary charge of "criminal association with a terrorist enterprise" – a charge often used in such cases in France.

Mr. Khalid's brothers, Djamel and Zinedine, are being investigated in France on suspicion of involvement in the robbery of more than \$1.28 million to finance terrorism.

Zinedine Khalid also is being investigated in a separate investigation into suspected Chechen terrorism.

Four other French citizens once held at Guantánamo were returned to France in late July. Mourad Benchellali, Imad Kanouni, Nizar Sassi and Brahim Yadel are being held in France as part of an investigation into suspected terrorism-related networks.