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Guantánamo detainees expected to be held on return

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Four British detainees due to arrive home today from Guantánamo Bay are expected to be arrested on arrival and taken to a London police station, their lawyers said last night.

The return of the Muslim men from the US base in Cuba, where they have been held without trial for nearly three years, will conclude a tense chapter in Britain's relations with the US. The US government suspects the four of having links with the al-Qaeda terrorist organisation.

London had lobbied intensely for their return and had given Washington "security guarantees" for the detainees to secure their release. Their lawyers, who will get access to the men at Paddington Green police station this evening, do not know yet how long they will be held. The Metropolitan police declined to comment.

The police can use anti-terror legislation to detain the men. However, officials thought it unlikely the four would be questioned for long and that they would be freed shortly. If the British had intelligence supporting suspicions of terrorist links, it would have been passed to the US and acted on by now, said one official.

It was understood there had been talks with the men's families about visits tomorrow. Louise Christian, one of two lawyers representing the men, said police had been asked to respect their need for sleep and allow them time to pray.

The US has released about 200 of nearly 800 suspected al-Qaeda and Taliban prisoners held in Guantánamo Bay and who were captured during the war in Afghanistan three years ago. The lawyers for Moazzam Begg, Feroz Abbasi, Martin Mubanga and Richard Belmar have said they did nothing wrong but found themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Muslim leaders yesterday met Hazel Blears, home office minister, to seek assurances there would be no unnecessary delays in questioning and that the men would receive medical attention. There are concerns about the health of Mr Begg, who was held by US forces in Afghanistan for a year before being sent to Guantánamo Bay.

Other Britons released last year said they were hooded and shackled to the floor and witnessed beatings. The four are expected to be accompanied on the flight from Cuba by a representative of the Foreign Office and the Metropolitan police.

One issue the men might consider on their return is whether to pursue the US government for compensation and redress. The other detainees, who have returned to Britain, launched their own legal action last autumn. In a suit filed in Washington, they are alleging torture and human rights violations and are each demanding \$10m (£5.9m) in compensation.

The defendants named include Donald Rumsfeld, US defence secretary, and General Richard Myers, chairman of the joint chiefs of staff.