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The Economist  
January 15, 2005

Release of British Guantánamo detainees

Dodgy claims surround the release of the last British Guantánamo detainees

AFTER nearly two years of what Jack Straw, the foreign secretary, described as “intensive and complex discussions” between Britain and America, the remaining four Britons in Guantánamo Bay are to be released. They are due to return to Britain within the next few weeks after being held without charge for nearly three years.

The Pentagon said the deal was clinched after Britain had “made a number of security assurances” including agreeing to “work to prevent [the men] from engaging in or otherwise supporting terrorist activities in the future”. But, announcing the imminent release on January 11th, Mr. Straw told the House of Commons that “no side undertakings” had been given.

When the first five British Guantánamo detainees came home last March, they were promptly arrested under the Terrorism Act 2000, but were released without charge after just a few hours questioning. This time, it could be different. The fact that the four remaining Britons were not released at the same time as the others suggests that the suspicions against them were more serious. Two had been designated for trial before special military commissions. But getting enough evidence for a prosecution before English courts may prove very difficult, if not impossible.

Prosecuting terrorist suspects is never easy. Of the 664 people arrested in Britain under the Terrorism Act since September 11th 2001, less than a fifth have been charged with terrorist offences, and only 17 have been convicted. Nearly half have been released without charge.

The Cuban base has been a running sore in America's relations with its closest ally in George Bush's “war on terror”. “We regard the circumstances and conditions of all detainees [in the camp] as unacceptable,” Mr. Straw recently declared. In private, the language has been a lot stronger, particularly since the revelations of prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib in Iraq has lent credence to allegations of similar abuse at Guantánamo. Four former British detainees who claim they were tortured are suing Donald Rumsfeld, America's defence secretary, for £6m (\$11m).

“Had it not been for the nature of our alliance...we would not have got back those nine detainees,” Mr Straw said this week. But around 200 other Guantánamo detainees, many from countries with no special relationship with the United States, have already been released. Some 550 remain. Most are no longer of any intelligence value, American officials admit. Indeed, they have become an embarrassment, and an expensive one at that. Expect more releases.