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Reason for Terror Suspect's Release Sought

ROD McGUIRK
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CANBERRA, Australia - The opposition Labor Party asked the government on Wednesday to explain if the release of an Australian terror suspect held for three years at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, was linked to his claims he was tortured while under U.S. supervision in Egypt.

The suspect, who the United States believes had foreknowledge of the Sept. 11 al-Qaida attacks, won't be allowed to leave Australia after being repatriated.

"I don't think he will have an option in terms of leaving Australia," Australian Attorney-General Philip Ruddock told radio 2UE. "I don't think it is in the expectation of the United States that he would be going elsewhere."

The government announced Tuesday that Sydney resident Mamdouh Habib, who was born in Egypt, will be released without charge from Guantanamo Bay.

Last week, one of Habib's court affidavits was made public in which he said that after he was arrested in Pakistan he was transferred to Egypt, where he was tortured with beatings and electric shocks and was nearly drowned.

His lawyers said they believed the United States had asked Pakistan to send Habib to Egypt knowing he would likely be tortured there. Egypt has not commented on the allegations.

Habib's lawyer, Stephen Hopper, said Wednesday that Habib was under U.S. supervision in Pakistan and Egypt.

Labor's spokeswoman on legal matters, Nicola Roxon, said the government must explain whether the affidavit had prompted the American decision to release Habib.

"We think it's very suspicious that Mr. Habib is being released so quickly after those allegations of torture were made last week and would like to know if it has anything to do with his release," Roxon told Sky television.

"We know that the Americans are sensitive to those allegations. If there were some truth in them, it might be a reason for releasing him," she said.

Prime Minister John Howard said the United States had its reasons for releasing Habib but would not elaborate except to say that the 48-year-old father of four would remain a "security interest" in Australia.

Habib's wife, Maha Habib, said she was thrilled when told her husband would be coming home but criticized the Australian government for allowing the United States to detain her husband without charge for three years.

"I couldn't believe it at first," she told reporters in Sydney. "They are really a disgrace (for) what they've done to my husband," she added, referring to Australian authorities.

The United States has said Habib confessed that he knew in advance of the al-Qaida plot to fly hijacked airliners into buildings in Washington and New York in 2001, and that he had trained some of the hijackers in martial arts. His attorneys claim the confessions were coerced.

Habib's torture allegations were part of an affidavit filed in the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia in November as part of an application to have him released from Guantanamo Bay. They were made public last week.

Amnesty International said the Australian government must fully investigate Habib's torture allegations even though the U.S. case against him was likely to be dropped.

"Our concern is that those allegations are taken seriously," Amnesty's Australian campaign manager Andrew Beswick said.

The Pentagon released a statement maintaining that Habib and four Britons who are also to be released are enemy combatants, but that the Australian and British governments would try to prevent them from engaging in terrorism in the future.

On Tuesday, British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw said that Moazzam Begg, Feroz Abbasi, Martin Mubanga and Richard Belmar will be freed from Guantanamo Bay and returned to Britain.

They are among 550 prisoners from 42 countries being held at the U.S. naval base in Cuba after being detained during the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan.

Their impending release follows months of sensitive negotiations between Washington and London to address U.S. security concerns and a direct appeal by Prime Minister Tony Blair to President Bush. Britain maintained that the proposed military tribunal that Begg and Abbasi were to face did not meet international standards of justice.

The Australian government said that the only other Australian captive at Guantanamo Bay, David Hicks, would face trial by a U.S. military commission in Cuba in March.