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Guantanamo Returnees' Treatment Criticized

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LONDON -- A lawyer for two of five British suspects released from U.S. custody in Guantanamo Bay criticized British police Wednesday for their treatment of the detainees on their return to Britain.

Gareth Peirce said that the Metropolitan Police, who arrested four of the five men who returned to Britain on suspicion of involvement in terrorism, made her sleep-deprived clients undergo fingerprinting procedures for too long.

Peirce represents Asif Iqbal and Shafiq Rasul -- two of the five men who arrived in Britain late Tuesday after spending more than two years at the U.S. detention camp in Cuba.

Rasul, Iqbal, Ruhul Ahmed and Tarek Dergoul were all arrested under a section of the Terrorism Act that concerns alleged involvement in the commission, preparation, or instigation of terrorist acts.

They are being held at the high security Paddington Green station in west London where they are to be questioned individually by Anti-Terrorist branch officers.

Peirce said that the men, who were flown back to Britain on a military plane accompanied by independent observers, were suffering from severe sleep deprivation.

"The procedures went on far too long last night, unnecessary and protracted fingerprinting which continued until way after midnight," Peirce said.

"It was very clear that they should have been allowed to sleep long before they were and it was very clear that their cells were too cold," she added. "We told the police that they are simply compounding the unlawfulness of the last two years."

Police said the four men were examined by a forensic medical examiner to ensure they were fit to be detained and interviewed by police. They were allowed a telephone call and access to lawyers of their choice.

"I welcome the fact that these men are no longer in legal limbo," said Charles Kennedy, leader of the opposition Liberal Democrats party. "Two years without proper recourse to lawyers or access to their families was too long."

Some legal experts doubt there will be enough evidence to try any of the returnees because information gleaned from interrogation at Guantanamo would be inadmissible in court.

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A fifth man, 37-year-old Jamal al-Harith, was released after being questioned briefly by immigration officers at the air base. He was given a police escort to an undisclosed location.

Al-Harith's lawyer, Robert Lizar, said his client wanted the U.S. authorities "to answer for the injustice which he has suffered."

"He has been detained as an innocent for a period of two years. He has been treated in a cruel, inhumane and degrading manner, he wants the authorities to answer for that," Lizar added.

The five were released from the U.S. Navy prison in Cuba after months of talks between British and American officials, including President Bush and Prime Minister Tony Blair, who discussed the detentions when Bush visited London in November.

Four Britons remain at Guantanamo -- Moazzam Begg, Feroz Abbasi, Richard Belmar and Martin Mubanga. Begg and Abbasi had been listed as some of the first detainees likely to face a military commission, a possibility Britain has criticized.

About 640 prisoners are held at Guantanamo on suspicion of links to Afghanistan's fallen Taliban regime or al-Qaida.

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