

From correspondents in Denpasar, Bali

March 05, 2009 10:47pm

**AN Indonesian court has overturned the convictions of five Australians sentenced to prison for illegally entering West Papua in a light plane last year.**

Pilot William Scott-Bloxam, 62, his wife Vera, 54, and their three friends Karen Burke, 51, Hubert Hofer, 57 and Keith Mortimer, 60, were expected to be deported within days following successful appeals, a spokesperson for the group said.

"The High Court of Jayapura has allowed our client's appeals and ordered them to leave Indonesia immediately," said spokesman Mohammad Rifan from Austrindo Law Office.

"We expect they will fly out in their plane once all the paperwork has been finalised, around the middle of next week.

"Our clients are very grateful for the support from the Australian embassy and Government.

"They are now pleased that this matter has been resolved and are looking forward to returning home to their families and resuming their lives."

The Merauke District Court had jailed Bloxam for three years and fined him 50 million rupiah (\$6,500) for flying a small plane into Indonesian airspace without permission on September 12

last year.

Each of his passengers was sentenced to two years jail and given a 25 million rupiah fine (\$3250).

The five, who were initially suspected of being foreign spies, were released from a Merauke prison last week to await the outcome of their appeals, after their lawyers requested mercy from the courts.

They were being held under city detention.

As soon as the court paperwork was complete, they were expected to make the one-hour flight back to Horn Island in the Torres Strait, where they had embarked on their ill-fated joy-ride, Rifan said.

The group, from Cape York on Australia's northern tip, had described their trip as a sightseeing flight and mistakenly believed they could get visas on arrival in Papua.

There are strict restrictions placed on visiting Papua, which has been troubled by a low-level separatist insurgency since the 1960s.

Journalists are barred from entering the province without special permission, and human rights groups have accused the Indonesian military of widespread human rights abuses there.

Rifan said the High Court decision upheld the defence argument that the air traffic controller and immigration officers failed in their duties by firstly allowing the plane to land, and secondly allowing them to enter the region.

According to Indonesian law, the planes request for landing approval should have been denied and it should have been ordered out of Indonesian airspace, Rifan said.