

ONLY 15 minutes from their scheduled departure, the five Australian tourists detained for nine months in Indonesia's Papua province had their homecoming aborted yesterday.

As immigration officials strode towards the Australians' light plane at Merauke to hand over their stamped passports, an aggrieved prosecutor, Yafeth Bonai, emerged on the tarmac and angrily intervened.

With local media present and the bemused Australians looking on, Mr Bonai started shouting at the immigration officials, saying he had not seen the paperwork that cleared the Australians to leave.

A heated 20-minute altercation ensued in front of the plane, with Mr Bonai unprepared to accept the assurances by Indonesia's Immigration Department that a travel ban had been lifted after the country's highest court found the Australians innocent of immigration and aviation offences.

"I need to see it in black and white," Mr Bonai shouted. Told to ring his superiors and check, Mr Bonai responded: "We can't phone our bosses and order them around."

The five Queenslanders — pilot William Scott-Bloxam, his wife Vera, and passengers Keith Mortimer, Hubert Hofer and Karen Burke — now expect to fly home today.