

Aruba suspect freed after judge's ruling

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ORANJESTAD, Aruba --

A judge Friday ordered the release of the last of three suspects re-arrested last month in the disappearance of Natalee Holloway, ruling the evidence was not strong enough to continue holding him.

Joran van der Sloot was arrested Nov. 21 along with two other suspects, Surinamese brothers Deepak and Satish Kalpoe, who were released from jail Dec. 1 following a similar ruling.

Van der Sloot, 20, was ordered freed because the judge found the investigation "has not resulted in more direct evidence than before that Natalee Holloway has died as a result of a violent crime against her or that the suspect has been involved in such a crime," according to a statement from prosecutors.

Van der Sloot walked out of jail hours later, accompanied by one of his attorneys, Joseph Tacopina.

"It's been a long road, and we're very relieved and feel very much vindicated," Tacopina told The Associated Press.

The three were the last people known to see Holloway alive before she vanished on May 30, 2005, but have denied any role in her disappearance.

Van der Sloot was arrested in the Netherlands, where he has been attending college, and flown back to this Dutch Caribbean island on the basis of what prosecutors described as "new incriminating evidence" against the suspects.

Chief prosecutor Hans Mos said the young men did not divulge any new information under interrogation, leaving the investigation in the same place it was before the arrests.

"We thought there was a lot of material that urged them to tell us what happened, but they kept their mouths shut," Mos told the AP. "You never know when one of them will open up when confronted ... they were apparently very well instructed by their lawyers not to say anything to us."

Defense lawyers have accused prosecutors of rehashing old evidence, saying that a summary of the material shared with them mostly contained segments of interrogations that had not been transcribed previously and misunderstandings of recorded conversations.

Prosecutors were seeking a 60-day extension of van der Sloot's detention to continue questioning him in police custody, but they said the investigation will continue despite the suspects' release.

In their statement, prosecutors said they will decide whether to file charges in the case by the end of the month.

Holloway, of Mountain Brook, Ala., was seen leaving a bar with the three suspects hours before she was scheduled to return home with fellow high school classmates celebrating their graduation. Van der Sloot has said he left her alone on a beach that night but does not know how she vanished.

Prosecutors say they have evidence that Holloway, who was 18 when she disappeared, is dead.

No trace of Holloway has ever been found despite extensive searches involving hundreds of volunteers, Aruban soldiers, FBI agents and even Dutch F-16 jets equipped with search equipment.