

Sportingbet moves to free staff jailed in Turkey

Sportingbet will this week attempt to break the legal deadlock surrounding two London-based junior staff who have been thrown into an Istanbul jail.

The online gambling group is seeking a bail hearing for the pair – both Turkish nationals – who were arrested at the end of last month when they returned to Turkey on holiday. Neither man, who Sportingbet declines to name, have been charged.

Sportingbet has hired a local law firm, which is trying to establish why the pair were detained alongside around 30 individuals associated with Maslin Properties, the group's former marketing partner.

Andy McIver, the company's chief executive, said: „We are seeking a hearing next week to get the Turkish equivalent of bail or a charge. The whole thing is very frustrating. It's very unfair on the individuals.“

Mr McIver said he believes around 10 of the 30 people originally detained are still in custody. Sportingbet said last month that the detentions „related to Superbahis“, its Turkish business. However, reports in the Turkish press claim police are investigating allegations of organised crime, money laundering and tax evasion – rather than any crackdown on internet gambling. Mr McIver has previously stressed that such reports focused on Maslin.

Mr McIver reiterated that Sportingbet had no immediate plans to pull out of the market – as some rivals, such as PartyGaming and Bwin have done – though its board has said no director should travel to Turkey.

Turkish nationals, who bet chiefly on football, contributed

13.9pc of Sportingbet's net gaming revenues in the company's third quarter, down from 25.8pc in the second.

PartyGaming pulled out of the Turkish market last year citing „recent legislation which prohibits certain forms of online gaming „.

Sportingbet's interpretation of the law is that it can continue taking bets as long as it has no assets or operations in Turkey. The group's computer processing is in Guernsey and customer support in Dublin.