

DECEPTION SPURS IMMIGRATION AGENCY FIRINGS

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Body

The idea was to create a mirage in the Everglades so that seven congressmen would hail the **Immigration** and Naturalization Service, applauding its expertise in managing the steady stream of undocumented foreigners into South Florida.

So just before the delegation arrived, **immigration** officials in Miami, with help from the regional director's office, got rid of more than 100 detainees from an overcrowded detention center: They released 59, including nine criminals; shipped 61 more to different facilities; and warehoused 19 in distant jails.

Then they laid on overtime help at Miami International Airport to keep the usual logjam at customs flowing freely and took criminal aliens out of holding cells and let them sit in the waiting room until the delegation finished its tour. But the INS employees union blew the whistle, and on Friday the **immigration agency's** inspector general issued a 200-page report, documenting the **deception** in detail.

The report recommended the **firing** or suspension of 13 INS officials, including the **agency's** eastern regional director, the director of the Miami district, and the Washington-based director of congressional affairs.

INS Commissioner Doris Meissner relieved Eastern Regional Director Carol D. Chasse and Miami District Director Walter D. Cadman last week, pending further action by the Justice Department.

The report, a follow-up to a summary released earlier, shows that INS officials were worried early last year about the planned visit June 10, 1995, by seven members of the House Task Force on **Immigration**.

In an e-mail message to key staff cited in the report, Cadman relayed Meissner's concern that "it would take very little to put the kiss of death on their (the delegation's) views toward INS." Meissner "wants a sharp-looking, heads-up group of employees doing their jobs," it said.

To translate this wish into action, the report said, the INS had to contend with chronic overcrowding at the Krome Service Processing Center in the Everglades, about 23 miles southwest of Miami, and snail's pace processing at the airport.

From the beginning, the report suggests, INS officials decided to mask these problems: "Employees who are doing the best job under adverse conditions send the message we want to send," said a May 23, 1995, e-mail message from Chasse, reprinted in the report.

A few days later, INS Director of Congressional Affairs Pamela Barry met with Miami officials to caution them that "no one should discuss (the airport's) staffing problems with" the delegation.

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On June 9, Miami Deputy District Director Valerie Blake notified Eastern regional headquarters about overcrowding at Krome, and got permission to "move some people out before the delegation came," the report said. That afternoon, the report said, Krome Camp Administrator Kathy Weiss notified Blake in an e-mail that there were 377 people in the detention center and described plans to ship some elsewhere, including a "group to be stashed out of sight for cosmetic purposes."

"Please advise whether Cubans can be included," the Weiss e-mail continued, "bearing in mind the fact that moving them will probably cause the remainder to complain, both to relatives and the congressional delegation."

Blake replied within the hour: "Thanks for your prompt response," her e-mail said.

The report said INS sent one batch of detainees to Jackson County Jail near Tampa and another group to Key West to await deportation. Fifty-nine detainees were released, including 35 who had not been medically cleared and nine held for criminal offenses such as burglary and drug trafficking.

At the airport, INS nearly doubled the staff June 10 to keep the traffic moving through customs and to create a false impression of efficiency, the report said. Airport holding cells were emptied and detainees there allowed to sit in an anteroom.

The visit went off as planned. But union officials, belatedly told of the delegation's arrival and threatened with arrest if they tried to attend a closed airport briefing, decided to send a letter to Task Force Chairman Rep. Elton Gallegly, R-Calif. Gallegly began the investigation.

INS officials told investigators they were in a no-win situation: "If we moved them (the Krome detainees), we would be construed as having done something wrong," Blake said. "If we left them there . . . we (would be) accused of not being able to handle our workload."

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