

Jailed Immigrants On Hunger Strike; Men Being Detained by INS Protest Deportation Effort

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Body

At least a dozen men jailed by the Washington office of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service are participating in a hunger strike to protest government efforts to deport them that have kept them in prison for months and in some cases years.

Most of the protesters at the Piedmont Regional Jail in Farmville, Va., face deportation because of convictions for crimes ranging from distribution of marijuana to armed robbery. But they have been detained indefinitely because their countries of origin--Cuba, Cambodia and Iran, among them--refuse to take them back.

Others don't have criminal records at all, including a West African immigrant seeking political asylum who said he has been held by the INS since he arrived at Dulles International Airport nearly three years ago. In addition, some of the inmates have convinced judges that they should not be deported but remain incarcerated by the INS for various reasons.

One Cuban detainee who said in a telephone interview that he had not eaten in 15 days was placed on intravenous fluids briefly on Monday, and jail officials said they persuaded another inmate who had gone without food for a week to eat Tuesday. Officials are monitoring the health of the other protesters as well.

It is unclear how rigorous the hunger strike is. Inmates said they are sustaining themselves on water and an occasional bite. Lewis Barlow, the jail superintendent, said that the strikers have been refusing meals but that most have been purchasing soup and snacks at the jail's commissary.

INS detention policies have been the target of hunger strikes before, most notably last spring by Cuban detainees at the federal Krome Detention Center outside Miami. That protest, along with a series of federal court rulings against the INS policies, led the government to begin reviewing deportation cases and releasing some immigrants who were not considered dangerous or a flight risk.

At the time, the Washington office of the INS, which has jurisdiction over the District and Virginia, said it was examining 43 cases of individuals under long-term detention to identify those eligible for release pending deportation. But the hunger strikers at Piedmont and their attorneys said they have seen no sign of such a review.

"Theoretically, they're supposed to have a procedure, but in practice it hasn't happened," said Beverly Yeskolski, a lawyer who represents Sophan Phith, 22, a Cambodian refugee who has lived in Chesapeake, Va., since age 4. "These people are sitting in jail indefinitely. . . . There's nothing to stop INS from keeping these people in prison for the rest of their lives."

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Phith was convicted on a marijuana distribution charge in 1997 and served a nine-month prison term, followed by enrollment in a work-release program. The INS picked him up in December but has been unable to expel him because Cambodia does not accept deportees from the United States.

"I made a mistake in high school. I committed a crime. But I served nine months, and afterwards the American kids went home, but I'm still here," he said. "I'm going to stay on hunger strike until there's some justice. . . . I'm weak now. Sometimes, when I walk, I black out."

Several residents of the Washington area are among the protesters. Mohammad Haghverdi, 47, of Waldorf, a permanent resident from Iran, has been detained since March because of a 1994 misdemeanor battery conviction. Juan Benito Rodriguez, 35, of Alexandria, a Cuban-born permanent resident, was convicted on a cocaine charge last year.

Inmate Elvis Lewis, 40, of Stafford, said the hunger strike was also intended to draw attention to the "horrible" conditions at the jail. He said the 60 or so INS detainees there are not separated from other inmates. The facility is crowded and the lights remain on 24 hours a day, he said.

Lewis, who fled to the United States from Grenada in 1981 and faces deportation because of a 1984 misdemeanor marijuana conviction, said the strikers also want to be held in facilities closer to their families and attorneys. The jail is about 60 miles west of Richmond and about 170 miles from Washington.

INS spokeswoman Ernestine Fobbs said that the agency reviews the cases of deportees on a regular basis and that two officers have been sent to the jail to "address the needs of each [protester] and hear their concerns."

"We're monitoring the situation. . . . We are taking this seriously and are working toward a reasonable solution of the matter," she said. "We will ensure that all detained aliens in our custody will be treated with dignity and respect."

Jail officials said the only inmate who has required medical attention is Claudio Monreal, 37, a Cuban-born construction worker from Harrisonburg, Va., who was convicted last year of assault and battery for spitting on a police officer. He has been held by the INS since November 1998, though a judge in April decided he should not be deported.

"I won my case, but they're still holding me, and I don't know why," said Monreal, who was placed on intravenous fluids Monday. "I'm not a threat to society."

Two of the protesters say they are being detained for reasons other than a previous criminal conviction.

"I don't know why I'm jailed. I've spent almost three years in jail, and I want my freedom," said Ali Camara, 44, an immigrant from Guinea who apparently applied for and was denied political asylum. "I'm seeking protection against torture. I can't go back to Guinea, because I will be tortured by the government."

Like many of the detainees, Camara speaks little English and does not have an attorney. INS officials said they were reviewing the cases and could not yet comment on the circumstances of Camara's detention.

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Jailed Immigrants On Hunger Strike; Men Being Detained by INS Protest Deportation Effort

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