

JAIL IN TINY ILLINOIS TOWN HAS INFLUX OF INS PRISONERS; ALIENS OF 40 NATIONALITIES ARE BEING HOUSED IN ULLIN

St. Louis Post-Dispatch (Missouri)

August 26, 2002 Monday Five Star Lift Edition

Copyright 2002 St. Louis Post-Dispatch, Inc.

Section: NEWS ; Pg. A1

Length: 1416 words

Byline: Imran Vittachi Of The Post-Dispatch

Dateline: ULLIN, ILL.

Body

Corn, wheat and soybean fields blanket the landscape that holds a transient population of foreigners stranded as they await a forced exit from the United States.

These are the fields of lost dreams for the nationals of more than **40** countries who, as unwanted **aliens**, are **jailed** within the whitewashed walls of Ullin's Tri-County Detention Center.

The privately run **jail** is a low-rise, compact building with barred skylights, lockdown cells and fences topped with razor coils. Since last year's terrorist attacks, its **prisoner** list appears to include more Arab and Muslim names than before Sept. 11.

Surrounding Pulaski County owns the **jail**, contracting it out to the U.S. Marshal's Service and the Immigration and Naturalization Service. The INS is Tri-County's best customer. Most of the **jail's** inmates are INS detainees, who were arrested in one of the three states that make up the Chicago district -- Illinois, Indiana and Wisconsin.

The past year has brought a bumper-crop of INS arrivals, compared to the previous three years since the **jail** opened in 1999, said Gil Walker, chairman and chief executive of GRW Corp., a Tennessee company that staffs and runs the **jail**.

"Demand for service has increased since Sept. 11," he said.

Walker estimated that the inmate population and number of Arab and Muslim detainees at Tri-County had risen by 10 percent since September.

But officials of the Justice Department deny that its immigration and security agencies are singling out Arabs or Muslims for deportation.

The foreign men (the **jail** does not **house** women) may spend anywhere from two weeks to 10 months inside Tri-County as they wait for a one-way ticket home. INS officials say that the foreigners are being held there and at other **jails** and prisons nationwide for violating immigration law and nothing else.

Either they've overstayed their visas, or they've committed crimes that the INS says qualifies them for expulsion.

The detainees awaiting a one-way ticket home rarely go outside into the small enclosure that serves as the **jail's** recreation yard. So they are virtually invisible to the people of Ullin, a dirt-poor patch of the American heartland, 155 miles southeast of St. Louis near where the Ohio and Mississippi rivers meet.

JAIL IN TINY ILLINOIS TOWN HAS INFLUX OF INS PRISONERS; ALIENS OF 40 NATIONALITIES ARE BEING HOUSED IN ULLIN

Ullin has 550 residents. Downtown, squashed against the Illinois Central Railroad tracks, is a tight circle of narrow streets and local businesses. The highlights include Porky's Fine Food Restaurant, a general store and an outlet that distributes animal feed products.

Moved to Texas

"Before we moved that bunch the other day, I counted 42 nationalities," said Jack Parks, a liaison officer with the Immigration and Naturalization Service who is stationed at the jail.

Parks took visiting journalists from St. Louis on a tour inside. He looked down from a hidden overhead surveillance room at a group of Laotian, Cambodian and Vietnamese detainees.

Parks was referring to 104 INS detainees who'd just been transferred from Ullin to a holding facility in Texas. They were moved because of a space shortage for the region's growing population of detainees, he said.

They had been arrested under federal deportation orders. And since the agency has no detention facility of its own in the district, it must rent space from 30 correctional facilities, including the Ullin jail, said Marilu Cabrera, an INS spokeswoman in Chicago.

One of the detainees transferred to Texas was an Afghan, Mohamad Dawlatzai. Before his transfer on Aug. 12, a Post-Dispatch reporter interviewed him at length. He reported that in early August, 10 newcomers - all Arabs or Muslims - arrived at Ullin.

Dawlatzai has been in INS custody since last October, when he was released from an Illinois prison after serving six years for drug smuggling.

He said that he's seen many nationals of Arab countries or countries with large Muslim populations arriving or passing through the jail during his stay there. When he was first interviewed in mid-July, he estimated that 30 to 40 of the jail's maximum of around 200 inmates were Arabs or Muslims.

Dawlatzai said that no federal law enforcement officers had questioned him about whether he's had ties with anti-American terrorist groups.

But Arshad-Abdul Wahid, a 21-year-old detainee from Pakistan, said that the FBI agents had asked him and other Muslims similar questions.

"They asked me which mosque I went to in Chicago," said Wahid, a detainee arrested by the INS for overstaying his student visa. "They asked, 'Do you know anyone connected to terrorism?' I said I don't know. They asked everybody here the same question."

INS faces criticism

Since Sept. 11, immigration lawyers in both St. Louis and Chicago say they have noticed an increase in cases involving aliens from Arab and predominantly Muslim countries. Lawyers say the heavier caseloads mean longer delays for clients to get their day in court.

Yaser Tabbara is a Syrian-American lawyer in training with Heartland Alliance. The group is a nonprofit organization in Chicago that gives legal help to undocumented aliens.

Tabbara said he suspected that the INS was under pressure from the Justice Department to detain Arab and Muslim aliens living in the Chicago area's Arab-American strongholds.

He said the government was using the pretext of the INS enforcing immigration violations as a way to round up and kick out Arabs and Muslims who may be seen as posing a domestic security threat.

JAIL IN TINY ILLINOIS TOWN HAS INFLUX OF INS PRISONERS; ALIENS OF 40 NATIONALITIES ARE BEING HOUSED IN ULLIN

"If the INS is to apply the law and apprehend all people (non-Arabs and non-Muslims as well), the INS wouldn't have enough space to detain those numbers," Tabbara said. He often drives the 350 miles down Interstate 57 to Ullin, where he conducts informational sessions with the jail's Arab and Muslim inmates.

Justice Department spokesman Jorge Martinez called absurd the suggestion that the INS was singling out Arabs and Muslims in enforcing immigration law, or prosecuting aliens who commit crimes or overstay their visas.

"The Justice Department exists to uphold the laws of the United States of America - not to engage in racial profiling," Martinez said.

Michael Heston, director of the district office of the INS in Kansas City (which covers Missouri and Kansas), declined the Post-Dispatch's request under the Freedom of Information Act to disclose the names and nationalities of more than 170 people detained in his jurisdiction in mid-July.

He cited the detainees' rights to privacy.

Immigration lawyers and constitutional rights experts claim that changes made to immigration laws in 1996 have resulted in a big jump in the number of aliens being detained because of alleged violations and crimes. As a result, sources said, Arab and Muslim detainees now have to wait longer for their day in court.

Lawyers point to the change made in 1996 that broadened the term "aggravated felony." The definition sets out some of the rules that trigger detention and deportation orders. It has fueled soaring detention rates.

Because of the change, immigration lawyers say, the government can round up and expel aliens convicted of felonies as well as those who have committed some lesser crimes.

Of the 19,137 aliens who were detained by the INS last year, the Bureau of Justice Statistics said that 14.5 percent of them had been convicted of property offenses.

Jail boosts economy

Detaining more aliens has been a boon for Pulaski County and the private company that runs Ullin's jail.

In the late 1990s, Pulaski County was designated as part of an economic empowerment zone by the federal government as a way to help boost its economy.

That meant the people who built the Tri-County jail got incentives for putting it in Pulaski County.

And Pulaski County got 50 new jobs to staff and guard the jail, and an increase in demand for local services.

Both Walker and Gerry Wozniak, the jail's administrator, are proud of how they run the Ullin jail. They said they strive to ensure that the inmates who are slated for deportation are made as comfortable as possible during their stays there.

Their cultural needs and customs are accommodated. For example, every Friday the loft in the cellblock's library is reserved for group prayers among the resident Muslims. Tri-County officials also said they offered training for inmates in things like English language and computer courses.

"We're a kind of an innkeeper," Walker said. "We don't just warehouse inmates. All we do is give them a chance to get their lives turned around."

Notes

JAIL IN TINY ILLINOIS TOWN HAS INFLUX OF INS PRISONERS; ALIENS OF 40 NATIONALITIES ARE
BEING HOUSED IN ULLIN

Graphic

MAP, GRAPHIC GRAPHIC GRAPHICS

(1) Post-Dispatch Graphic , Map - Ullin, Illinois

(2) Graphic , Chart - Federa immigration suspects

From 1996 to 2000, the number of people suspected of an immigrationoffense as the most series charge they were facing more than doubled

(1985 to 2000)

2000 - 16,495

Bureau of Justice Statistics

Classification

Language: English

Subject: PRISONERS (89%); PRISONS (88%); NEGATIVE PERSONAL NEWS (86%); IMMIGRATION (86%); POLITICAL DETAINEES (85%); IMMIGRANT DETENTION CENTERS (85%); CORRECTIONS (85%); US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (68%); LAW ENFORCEMENT (67%); JAIL SENTENCING (67%); ARRESTS (67%); MUSLIMS & ISLAM (65%); SPECIAL INVESTIGATIVE FORCES (64%); PRISON PRIVATIZATION (62%); MARSHALS (60%); TERRORISM (60%); TERRORIST ATTACKS (50%); EXECUTIVES (50%)

Company: BMO HARRIS BANK NA (92%); GRW CORP (68%); BMO HARRIS BANK NA (92%); GRW CORP (68%); BUREAU OF JUSTICE STATISTICS (59%); BUREAU OF JUSTICE STATISTICS (59%); US DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE (54%); US DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE (54%)

Organization: BUREAU OF JUSTICE STATISTICS (59%); BUREAU OF JUSTICE STATISTICS (59%); US DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE (54%); US DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE (54%)

Geographic: CHICAGO, IL, USA (51%); INDIANA, USA (79%); ILLINOIS, USA (79%); UNITED STATES (92%)

Load-Date: August 27, 2002