

Judge Frees 3 Cubans Acquitted of Hijacking

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Body

Federal officials on Christmas Eve released three Cuban refugees acquitted of hijacking a plane to the United States and later granted political asylum by a judge.

The release came a day after two members of Congress accused immigration officials of illegally detaining the men and threatened to call for a congressional hearing if they were not set free.

"This is certainly great news and a great Christmas present," Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Fla.) said tonight. Rep. Lincoln Diaz-Balart (R-Fla.) also lobbied for the release of Adel Regalado Ulloa, Jose Roberto Bello-Puente and Leonardo Reyes Ramirez.

An immigration judge ruled last week that the Cubans should be granted political asylum because they likely would face retaliation if forced to return home, but federal officials said the men would be detained while they decide whether to appeal the order.

The men were on conditional release, said their lawyer, Ralph Fernandez, meaning that the case against them remained active and that they would have to report to the INS every three months. The attorney called the arrangement "fairly standard."

The INS also filed a notice that it would appeal the judge's ruling to grant asylum, Fernandez said.

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