

INMATES ON HUNGER STRIKE AT IMMIGRATION CENTER / THE PROTEST FOCUSES ON DELAYS IN GETTING PAROLE AND REQUESTS FOR MORE FREQUENT FOOD, AND MORE OF IT.

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Body

Inmates are on a hunger strike at an Immigration and Naturalization Service detention center, protesting parole delays and saying they want more food.

In 1995, about 100 immigrants at the same detention center broke windows, destroyed furniture and overpowered guards in a 4 1/2-hour riot to protest physical abuse and other inhumane conditions. The center was taken over by new management last year after an INS investigation confirmed the inmates' complaints.

The detention center confined all 260 detainees to their dormitories and barred attorney visits on Wednesday, a day after about 100 inmates refused to eat dinner, said center spokesman Robert Barry. The lockdown ended yesterday.

The inmates skipped breakfast yesterday, but all but 34 members of one dorm ate lunch, said Lorelei Valverde, the INS officer-in-charge at the center. The detainees in that dorm later ate two cases of nectarines and fruit juice in the afternoon, although 22 did not eat dinner. Several waved their hands and mouthed "no food" through glass windows during a tour of the facility last night.

No one sought medical attention because of the hunger strike, and Valverde said many inmates had stashes of candy and other food to keep them going.

The detainees were most upset about the length of time it takes for appeals judges to rule on their requests for parole after they apply for political asylum, officials said. The process can take from six months to a year, said David Lee, an immigration attorney who represented several Chinese detainees who sought asylum after washing up on the shores of Bay Head, Ocean County, in a powerboat.

Rick Kenney, a spokesman for the Executive Office of Immigration Review in Falls Church, Va., said that delay is average for the nation. About 2,000 such cases are pending nationwide before the Board of Immigration Appeals, he said.

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"Careful review takes time," Kenney said. "The ones that take less time are the ones that are fairly quick to decide, and usually those are not the ones that are made in favor of the alien."

Some inmates also had asked for larger portions of food and a shorter interval between dinner, which is served between 5 p.m. and 6 p.m., and breakfast, which is served at 7 a.m.

Detainees are fed a diet of more than 2,000 calories a day. "It's ample nutrition," said Andrea Quarantillo, district director of the INS' Newark office.

The detainees were also upset about the cost of telephone cards that allow them to make long-distance calls to other countries. The center cut the price of the card in half, but the time available on the card was also halved.

The hunger strike is the first protest at the center since Nashville-based Corrections Corp. of America took it over in January 1997. INS fired the previous operator, Esmor Correctional Services Inc., after an investigation found that poorly trained guards abused the detainees physically and mentally, gave them spoiled food and deprived them of sleep.

Twelve Union County Jail guards were later indicted and accused of beating and abusing the detainees following the uprising. All but two are serving prison terms.

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