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TOP NEWS

Calif. Muslims Detained in Crowded, Cold Centers

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By Jill Serjeant

LOS ANGELES (Reuters) - Hundreds of Muslim men and boys are being subjected to strip searches in freezing, standing room only detention centers in southern California after being arrested for routine visa irregularities, immigration lawyers said on Thursday.

They estimated that between 1,000 and 2,500 males, some as young as 16, were spending their fourth day locked up in what they called inhumane conditions after voluntarily presenting themselves at immigration offices to register under new anti-terrorism rules.

"The situation in the detention centers is absolutely horrifying. In one center, they were ordered to strip down and given a strip search. They were only given a prison jumpsuit, without any underwear, T-shirts, socks or shoes. They were not given blankets. They are freezing," Iranian-American lawyer Sohelia Jonoubi told Reuters.

Justice Department officials in Washington, breaking an almost week-long silence on the arrests, said 227 people had been detained in California for overstaying their visas under a post-Sept. 11 program that requires men over 16, without permanent residence status, from 20 Arab or Muslim countries to register with authorities.

But the official figures differed widely from anecdotal evidence from families in the Los Angeles area who reported that scores of husbands, brothers and fathers had spent most of this week locked up and treated like criminals.

"These people are being held in inhumane conditions...We don't know how many. We have estimated anywhere between 1,000 to 2,500 detained in southern California. The INS in Los Angeles is overworked, overwhelmed and doing everything they can (but) these people were not prepared to handle it," Iranian-American Lawyers Association spokesman Kayhan Shakib told Reuters.

A TRAP?

Most of those detained were Iranians living in Los Angeles County and neighboring Orange County, which in the past 20 years have become home to some 600,000 Iranian exiles.

Lawyers battling to get the men released on bail said many were law-abiding immigrants who were in the process of getting U.S. green cards under a lengthy and complex INS procedure.

"These people came to the INS centers voluntarily. They are not flight risks. They were led to believe it was routine registration and now this is the biggest trap I have ever seen," Jonoubi said.

Some 3,000 people staged a peaceful protest in Los Angeles on Wednesday as hundreds more waited for hours to get their relatives released on bail from overwhelmed INS officials. Some protesters carried banners reading: "What's Next? Concentration camps?"

Community lawyers have been refused access to the detainees who they say are being shuttled round various detention centers in prison buses, shackled and in handcuffs, as the system creaks under the strain.

Families, allowed telephone access to their relatives, reported that the men were forced to sleep standing up, or on concrete floors with no blankets, and some had been hosed down with cold water. Drinking water is said to be scarce and in some cases, detainees must use toilets without doors or walls.

The relatives said that some detainees have been told they will be deported without seeing their relatives again.



Others are trying to get out on bail pending a hearing before an immigration judge which could take days or weeks.

BASIC NEEDS

INS spokesman Francisco Arcaute said he was confident the INS could deal with the situation, adding; "They have access to telephones, they have access to restrooms, they are given snacks. We understand there has been a bit of crowding, but my understanding is that we are meeting basic needs."

The southern California chapter of the ACLU said the detentions were "reminiscent of what happened in the past with Japanese-Americans" during World War II.



Shakib told Reuters that after talks with the INS, officials had promised to try to process the detainees more speedily and get more of them out on bail.

He said only 20 or 30 had been bailed out as of Wednesday. The Justice Department insisted about 100 people were still being held.

Activists said they expected more demonstrations in coming days. "The Iranian community is not going to sit and not respond to this outrage," said Jonoubi, a Los Angeles resident for 15 years and now a U.S. citizen.

"I cannot believe that I lived to see the day that such human rights violations occur in the United States of America in the 21st century."



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