Cuban detainees take hostages at Louisiana jail

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Five Cuban detainees at a rural Louisiana jail took the warden and several deputies hostage Monday afternoon, demanding to be taken to another country. On Tuesday the prisoners continued to hold Warden Todd Louviere and Deputies Jolie Sonnier and Brandon Boudreaux. A third deputy was released Monday night.

Hostage negotiators from the Federal Bureau of Investigation and Louisiana State Police were continuing to talk to the five men Tuesday afternoon.

As the five Cubans were returning from an exercise period on the roof of the St. Martin Parish sheriff's office they reportedly overtook the warden and deputies, armed with home-made knives. St. Martin Parish Sheriff's Capt. Audrey Thibodeaux reported that no one had been injured since the takeover began.

One of the Cubans, Jonne Ponce, 28, told local television station KLFY that the men wanted to return to Cuba. Ponce says he has been detained for 13 years. The other men were identified as Gerado Santana, 26; Elisalte L. Orta, 48; Roberto Grana Villar, 36; and Juan Miranda, age unknown. All the men excepting Villar are being held at the parish jail on behalf of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). Villar is reportedly being held on state charges.

The INS routinely contracts with county and parish jails to house immigrants. An INS spokesman said that 72 of the 160 inmates at the St. Martin Parish jail are being detained in INS custody, and that 60 of these 72 immigrants are from Cuba. INS detainees held at local jails are housed together with the general inmate population, despite the fact that they are not serving criminal sentences or awaiting trial.

Although arbitrary detention is clearly prohibited by international law, such INS detainees have no exact sentence or date when they can expect to be released. A September 1998 report by Human Rights Watch investigated the conditions of these INS detainees. They report that there are approximately 1,800 immigrants, termed "long-term unremovables," who are given no guarantee that they will ever be released from detention.

Most of these immigrants are citizens of countries with limited or no diplomatic relations with the US. These countries include, among others, Cuba, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Iran, Iraq and Libya. Palestinians are also frequently held in long-term detention. Human Rights Watch quotes Nestor Campos, a Cuban detained at the Orleans Parish Prison in Louisiana: "The guards used to tell me, ‘You'll be here until you're dead.'"

Officials at the St. Martin Parish Correctional Center refused to allow Human Rights Watch access to the facility for their investigative report, but the organization did visit other Louisiana facilities. Their investigation revealed horrendous conditions faced by INS detainees.

Detainees interviewed at the Orleans Parish Prison reported that their recreation was generally limited to one hour a week. A Cuban man interviewed at the Avoyelles Parish Prison recalled, "One guy got pneumonia. He asked for medical treatment, and they put him in a lockdown cell. He never got medical treatment. He was in the lockdown room for along time. He got skinny, skinny, then they let him go."

Although US immigration law states that immigrants have a right to legal counsel, the government is not required to pay for such representation. INS statistics show that only about 11 percent of all detained immigrants are represented by attorneys in immigration court. Many immigrants are indigent, and must seek out low-cost or free legal services. As immigrants are often incarcerated far from family and friends and transferred frequently, they are unable to depend upon these people

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to help them procure legal counsel. Carol Kolnichak, a *pro bono* political asylum attorney from New Orleans, said, "It's easier to visit my clients on death row than it is to visit an INS detainee at Orleans Parish Prison."

Protests over these deplorable conditions often lead to further maltreatment. At Orleans Parish Prison 18 INS detainees filed a grievance over a deputy who frequently verbally abused them. One detainee commented: "Now things are worse than ever with this deputy."

Undoubtedly similar conditions at the St. Martin Parish Correctional Center led the Cuban INS detainees to the desperate act of taking the warden and deputies hostage.

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