



NEW JERSEY CIVIL RIGHTS DEFENSE COMMITTEE
P.O. Box 353
Piscataway, NJ 08855-0353
www.nj-civilrights.org

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For Immediate Release
Contact: Eric Lerner
elerner@igc.org
973-736-0522

ICE ENDS DETENTION CONTRACT AT PASSAIC JAIL: CIVIL AND HUMAN RIGHTS GROUPS CLAIM VICTORY, DEMAND ACCOUNTABILITY AND ORGANIZE DEMONSTRATION AT JAIL

News that the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE/Department of Homeland Security) contract to hold immigrant detainees at Passaic County Jail (PCJ) will end, effective February 1, 2006, is welcomed by the New Jersey Civil Rights Defense Committee (NJCRDC), which has been demanding this termination for nearly four years. Although we see it is a significant victory for citizen and detainee activists and their supporters, whose protests against inhumane conditions and treatment at this facility have been ongoing, we are also demanding accountability for past inhumane treatment and are calling for the full release of affected detainees with a demonstration outside the jail on Sunday, January 8.

While the end of the contract is a step forward, the position of NJCRDC is that there must also be a reckoning for the guilty. The Sheriff and the Freeholders had many chances to stop ongoing torture and abuse. Instead they denied it and blamed the immigrants themselves, calling them 'dangerous criminals' to justify the level of brutality used against them. They refused to see the truth and act on it, resisting the quest for justice every step of the way. Detainees and former detainees in PCJ have told of systematic denial of access to lawyers, mail, telephone, family, outdoor exercise, critical medical care, and decent food, and have described degrading conditions and sometimes brutal physical and mental abuse by those supervising them.

The constitutionality of these incarcerations, which violate the Bill of Rights protections against holding any "person" without charge, has yet to be challenged in court. Immigrants can now be held without charge in "administrative detention" for various visa violations; or they may have been previously tried and convicted of an array of offenses for which they have done time or paid fines. Passaic County officials (unlike authorities at other detention facilities) have persisted in portraying the immigrant detainee population as "dangerous criminals," but their imprisonment is the ironic result of harsh regulations passed soon after the 1995 home-grown-terrorist bombing in Oklahoma City. Federal law in 1996 redefined

certain previous offenses, sometimes minor, as deportable felonies if committed by immigrants and consigned them to mandatory detention.

Our committee's immediate concern is for the well-being of current PCJ detainees. We think that instead of being transferred from PCJ to other jails where they face the same injustice and perhaps more abuse, they should be released back to their families and communities. In our opinion, termination is not enough. We have always said that the entire system of holding such immigrants in punitive detention is illegal. If the government thinks these immigrants are dangerous, they must bring criminal charges against them. If they don't have grounds for criminal charges then they should release them. Abuse and torture are not limited to Passaic County Jail. They are in fact built into the whole detention system. Abuse will only stop when the system stops, and all detainees are released."

New Jersey Civil Rights Defense Committee has called an emergency protest in solidarity with the detainees at Passaic County Jail which will take place this Sunday, January 8, at 1 pm, across the street from the Passaic County Jail at Main & Grand Streets in Paterson, NJ.

Local protest against human rights abuses at PCJ and other New Jersey facilities began in mid-2002, with demonstrations outside the jail and phone reports from inside by journalist-prisoner Farouk Abdel-Muhti, who led a major hunger strike there in early 2003. NJRDC followed with a 'March Against Fear' in South Paterson, where community activists were virtually outnumbered by armed cordons of police in riot gear. Frequent protests outside the PCJ on Main Street were followed by a mass appearance at a County Board meeting in September 2003 to educate the Freeholders about jail conditions and seek termination of the detention contract with ICE, which had become a multi-million dollar annual revenue stream for Passaic County.

There have been many hunger strikes and innumerable detainee protest petitions at PCJ, the most recent this past December 17. In November 2004, while the nation was still rocking with news of abuse at Abu Ghraib prison, Daniel Zwerdling of National Public Radio (NPR) broke his award-winning story about cruel and abusive treatment of detainees at both Hudson and Passaic County jails, including the inhumane use of attack dogs at PCJ, using information provided by NJCRDC. ICE subsequently banned dogs from U.S. immigration detention facilities, and the Inspector General of DHS initiated a new audit of facilities nationwide that included both Hudson and PCJ. NJCRDC cooperated fully with this audit, sharing its extensive files of eyewitness testimony about treatment at both facilities.