

SUBURBAN

200 LOCKED AWAY & UNDER THE RADAR

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There is a little gulag in New York City. And it is nothing to be proud of.

Its name is the Wackenhut Detention Center, and more than 200 human beings - men and women - languish ignored within its walls. Yet most New Yorkers have never heard about it.

The situation of the people inside the privately run immigration maximum- security jail is so hopeless that on Monday, 175 of the imprisoned men resorted to a desperate measure: They went on a hunger strike.

"Nobody is eating," said Makham Singh in a telephone interview. An immigrant from India in his 30s, Singh has a wife and two children who are American citizens. He has been in Wackenhut for six months.

"They bring us food and we send it back," added Singh.

The Wackenhut prison is a converted warehouse building with no windows in the middle of a warehouse district in Springfield Gardens, Queens.

It is drab and anonymous and out of the way, which works out well for keeping the men and women imprisoned in it out of New York's collective consciousness.

But the detainees are determined to do whatever it takes to let everybody know about the prison and what goes on inside it.

"We need people to know about our situation," Singh said. "We must be heard, and we will starve if we have to."

The strikers' demands are nothing if not fair. They are asking for the right to be treated humanely, the right to due process and appropriate medical care, the review of their cases and the immediate release of all noncriminal prisoners so they can be reunited with their families.

Many of the Wackenhut prisoners - people from all over the world - have been deprived of freedom for years even though no terrorism- related or other criminal charges have been brought against any of them.

"Yet they are locked up 23 hours per day, and several have been there a year or more," said Bobby Khan, a member of the Coney Island Avenue Project, a group based in the Pakistani community in Brooklyn that advocates for the rights of imprisoned immigrants.

"Most of them were picked up in the aftermath of 9/11 and have been held without criminal charges or due process and, in some cases, without access to a lawyer," Khan added. "The food is insufficient and inadequate, and even though some of the detainees have heart conditions or suffer from diabetes and ulcers, medical care is practically nonexistent."

Like Singh, several of the detainees - all of them confined for alleged immigration violations - are married to U.S. citizens and have American children. Yet the government refuses to release information about their status or what their future might be - even though few, if any, of the immigrant detentions since 9/11 have yielded any useful results for President Bush's "war on terror."

Shameful as it is, the misfortune of these immigrants and their families is just one more opportunity for big profits for Wackenhut, the private corporation running the jail under contract with the federal government.

"For example, the food they are given is so bad and so little that detainees have to buy cafeteria food," Singh said.

Inmates receive one dollar a day for work they do within the prison walls.

Pretty low stuff in anybody's book.

Yes, there is a little gulag in New York City. It is located in Queens and its name is the Wackenhut Detention Center. And everybody should know about the more than 200 human beings languishing behind its walls.aruz@edit.nydailynews.com.

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