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US Latter-day Saint missionaries to be deported from Guyana

By BERT WILKINSON

AP (02.09.2009) / HRWF Int. (07.09.2009) - Email: info@hrwf.net - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - At least 30 Latter-day Saint missionaries were detained Wednesday in the South American country of Guyana because they did not have updated travel documents, police said.

Most of them are U.S. citizens and will be given one month to leave before they are deported, Police Chief Henry Greene said. He declined further comment.

The missionaries were expected to be released late Wednesday to prepare for their departure, acting U.S. ambassador Karen Williams said.

"It does come as a surprise, but I don't want to speculate as to a reason" for the arrests, she said.

A lawyer for the missionaries, Nigel Hughes, said he filed a motion with the courts and a judge issued an injunction blocking police from expelling the missionaries Thursday.

It was unclear what prompted the arrests. No incidents involving the missionaries were reported prior to their detainment. They could be heard singing "We Shall Overcome" from their cells Wednesday night.

The church emissaries committed no known crimes and were simply doing missionary work, said attorney Leslie Sobers, a local spokeswoman for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

A statement from the church headquarters in Salt Lake says: "We are aware that some missionaries have been questioned in Guyana over new visa regulations. All missionaries are now back in their apartments. We are working with Guyana and U.S. authorities to reach an amicable solution."

Some 100 missionaries with the Church are estimated to work in Guyana. Kim Farah, a spokeswoman for the Church, said church leaders hope they can reach an amicable solution with Guyanese authorities.

U.S. citizens traveling to Guyana need a valid U.S. passport, and immigration officials usually grant visitors a 30-day stay, according to the U.S. Department of State.