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Guatemalan consulate 'satisfied' by conditions inside NCC

JENS MANUEL KROGSTAD, Courier Staff Writer

WATERLOO - A representative from the Guatemalan consulate in Chicago called Monday's immigration raid frightening, but said conditions inside National Cattle Congress are humane.

Gustavo Lopez, a consul general, toured the facilities this week. About 75 percent of detainees captured in the raid at Agriprocessors in Postville are Guatemalan.

In a Spanish-language interview, he said the strong show of force, combined with the name of the detention facility - National Cattle Congress - has left many of his country's people scared. He said they often ask if loved ones are sleeping among livestock as they await legal proceedings.

"The name 'National Cattle Congress' sounds very dramatic," he said. "But we were satisfied by the conditions of the facility. They know we are watching."

After touring the grounds and speaking with detainees, he said he found no evidence of human or civil rights violations. He called the tour encouraging, particularly because he expects more raids around the country.

Attorneys have complained they weren't allowed access to the detention center until Tuesday evening. But Lopez said he verified detainees had access to legal representation on Wednesday, as well as showers, bathrooms, phones and clothing.

"We ate the same food as the detainees," he said.

Lopez planned to alleviate some fears and complaints coming from St. Bridget Catholic Church in Postville during a visit to the church Thursday evening. Hundreds of Guatemalans have been staying there since Monday.

Rumors of another raid in Postville have persisted all week, but Lopez said a high-ranking Immigration and Customs Enforcement official assured him on Wednesday there will be no more raids in the town. Federal officials also have said, however, that the investigation continues.

People in the church also have complained of not hearing from detained loved ones. Lopez said he saw a list of 150 people who had made calls. Some detainees have opted not to use the phones when they are informed the calls may be traced or monitored, he said.