

VIENNA: The death of an Indian asylum seeker who was on hunger strike has led to growing human rights concerns here over the plight of illegal immigrants who have been detained in Austria. The authorities said that there are 19 people of Indian origin in preventive detention. Human rights activists here say that detainees are treated worse than criminals and that one in every three prisoner is on hunger strike. "Conditions in preventive detention worse than prison," screams a headline in the prestigious local daily Die Presse.

The focus of criticism is on inadequate medical care and legal advice available to detainees.

Johann Golob, senior spokesperson of the Austrian Police, told IANS that there are 19 people of Indian origin detained here as illegal immigrants. They are awaiting deportation and that seven are on hunger strike.

Gaganpreet Singh, an illegal immigrant, died in preventive detention Sep 14 after announcing his hunger strike Aug 7. According to Golob, Gaganpreet was living in Austria illegally since 2006 under a false name and age. In March this year he went underground after his request for asylum was rejected. He was arrested Aug 3.

"We know that he was of Indian origin because he said so and the language he spoke with the official interpreters was Hindi. But his real identity was still being verified before deporting him to India," Golob said. Austrian authorities are permitted to detain illegal immigrants in custody for not more than 10 months during which time the detainee has to be either deported or released.

Indian officials told IANS that they were trying to establish the true identity of people of Indian origin detained here before they could be deported. The process is thwarted when illegal asylum seekers held in custody delay signing forms and other papers required to deport them.

A senior Austrian diplomat said that he was not aware of a discussion over the death of the illegal immigrant of Indian origin in custody, on the day Speaker of the lower house of Indian parliament Meira Kumar arrived here with government officials.

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