



SIX SOCCER PLAYERS CHARGED WITH ROWDINESS, ORDERED NOT TO DRINK OR FLY SOUTHWEST

News / Airlines



Sept. 02--A Texas judge Wednesday ordered six San Diego-area men facing a federal charge of interfering with a flight crew not to fly on Southwest Airlines or drink.

Clinton E. Averitte, U.S. magistrate judge in Amarillo, Texas, set bail for each at \$10,000.

Charged are Saiman Hermez, 19; Jonathan Khalid Petras, 20; Ghazwan Assad Shaba, 21; Essa Solaqa, 20; Khalid Yohana, 19; and Wisam Imad Shaker, 23. They were brought to court in jail garb and handcuffs, escorted by FBI agents.

The six were on a Southwest flight from San Diego to Chicago on Monday night when they became "disruptive and did not comply with instructions" from flight attendants to quiet down and stop demanding liquor, according to a complaint filed by the U.S. attorney for North Texas.

The next court hearing is set for Sept. 14 when the six are expected to enter a plea. If convicted, each could face up to 20 years in prison and a \$250,000 fine, prosecutors said.

Meanwhile, Mark Arabo, a leader in the Chaldean community in eastern San Diego County, said

the community "intends[s] to wholeheartedly stand behind these young men moving forward." Arabo identified the six as Christians.

Arabo in an email to reporters said: "These young men made some regrettable actions. But they should not be misrepresented as anything greater than just that. They are not to be labeled as Chaldean, or Middle-Eastern men, but as young men who made a mistake."

Arabo said the six were told by Southwest personnel not to speak in their native language. "Not only is this intolerant, it is illegal," he said.

A Southwest spokesman, asked for comment on Arabo's assertion, said, "The reports we've collected do not reference this claim."

The six were traveling to Chicago for a soccer tournament that is part of the 82nd annual Assyrian Convention. Several are members of a team in the San Diego Chaldean Soccer League.

Averitte said it would be up to the probation officer for the six to decide whether they can continue their trip to Chicago or get their cellular phones back from the FBI.

Federal prosecutors say the six demanded alcohol and, when denied, "became aggressive by lunging forward at a flight attendant."

Another flight attendant who also refused to provide alcohol was called a racist and a pig, according to the complaint filed in court. The men attempted "to incite other passengers to join their noncompliant behavior" and called passengers profane names, the statement said.

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A flight attendant "was in fear for the safety of the crew and passengers and asked the pilots to divert the aircraft," according to the U.S. attorney. The pilot decided to land in Amarillo "out of an abundance of caution," the airline said.

After the plane landed in Amarillo, the six men were taken into custody and an additional six passengers left the aircraft in apparent solidarity with the ejected passengers, the airline said.

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