

Illegal immigrants march to the airport

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Some of the protesting immigrants at the Safi detention centre yesterday. Photo: Darrin Zammit Lupi

A large group of illegal immigrants managed to take their protest to the airport yesterday afternoon after escaping from the Hal Safi detention centre about two miles away.

Around 60 illegal immigrants pulled away the fence of the 'B' Block compound at about 1.50 p.m and started marching towards the airport. The officers guarding them, who were substantially outnumbered, according to Brigadier Carmel Vassallo, opted not to stop them and instead walked with them.

Once at the airport, however, Malta International Airport security, back-up police and army personnel joined forces in taking them back.

One of the illegal immigrants pulled at metal bars from one of the army vans sent to the airport to bring the group back, but otherwise the whole operation was relatively calm and without any incident of note.

It is not clear whether the illegal immigrants intended from the outset to head for the airport. An army official said the incident was more of a protest than an attempt to escape.

"The fact that they walked towards the airport may not mean much. They do not have a sense of direction and could have been heading elsewhere, anywhere," he said.

It seems the protest was prompted by the fact that several of the immigrants in detention got humanitarian or refugee status yesterday, which means they are free to leave the centre. Those protesting were probably expecting similar news, the same officer said.

An army helicopter was dispatched over Safi immediately after the escape as a precautionary measure.

Brigadier Vassallo said: "All those who escaped were brought back in... the helicopter was there just in case. I was informed of the protest and I instructed the men to walk with them - they could have done nothing else really."

Back at the detention centre, however, illegal immigrants mounted what looked like an impromptu protest, waving a number of banners calling for freedom.

Army officials reported the situation at the Hal-Far detention centre to be calm during this time. However, when the press and later anti-immigrant Imperium Europa activists turned up taking photos, the immigrants in the camp suddenly started protesting.

Yesterday's protest further exposes the ease with which illegal immigrants can force their way out of the detention centre, just under a fortnight after a large-scale coordinated protest when hundreds left their detention centres.

Brigadier Vassallo said resources would always be a problem but admitted that at the moment the army was seriously outnumbered.

To compound matters, a relatively weak chicken-wire fence makes protests and subsequent escapes like yesterday's almost impossible to contain.