

U.S. needs ‘more humane’ policy on immigration

BOSTON – After federal immigration officials spirited away to Texas nearly half of the 327 people arrested in a March 6 raid on a New Bedford handbag and backpack factory, Cardinal Sean P. O’Malley of Boston called for “some kind of comprehensive immigration reform.”

“While immigration reform is urgent, the needs of the women and children in New Bedford are desperate,” Cardinal O’Malley said in the March 15 Boston Globe in an opinion piece titled “A more humane immigration policy.”

According to news reports, Massachusetts officials, including Gov. Deval Patrick, were angered that before caseworkers from the state Department of Social Services were allowed to speak to detainees to determine whether any of those arrested had left children behind at home or school, almost half of the detainees were flown to Texas March 8. Federal officials refused to share with the state a list of those detained, and have refused requests by the state to halt additional flights.

“I hope our first priority is the families who were impacted, not a search for the villains,” Cardinal O’Malley said.

“It is the case that most of the these families are ‘illegals,’ people who do not have the proper legal documents to be in the United States,” he said. “But before they are ‘illegal,’ they are human – women and men with families, hopes and dreams, a determination to find a better life for their children. Their humanity, human dignity and – most of all – their children have the first claim on our conscience as Americans.”

Cardinal O’Malley did not propose elements of current immigration policy that need to be improved, but he pointed out the shortcomings that were evident following the raid.

“In order to be released from custody, those arrested in New Bedford had to assert that they were ‘the sole caretaker’ of their children,” the cardinal said. “Mothers can

be separated from their children, and perhaps deported, as long as there would be a caretaker for the children remaining in Massachusetts.

“Immigration law and policy are complex, but a test of ‘sole caretaker or parent’ as the determinant of being able to remain united with one’s children fails the test of humane response.”

Cardinal O’Malley added, “The concrete, crying needs of the most vulnerable people impacted by this raid must be addressed before we set out to fix the system.”

The majority of those taken into custody in the March 6 raid were Guatemalans, Mexicans and Hondurans, along with a few Brazilians and some Portuguese and Salvadorans, according to a lawyer for the Catholic Social Services office in Fall River.

Most of those who were rounded up were women who operated sewing machines. The sweep also revealed sweatshop conditions in the factory.

After the raid about 200 women were transported to Fort Devens in Ayer for questioning; about 60 were later let go after they were found to be eligible for release.

“These events provide another example of why some form of comprehensive immigration reform is needed. President George W. Bush has called for it, Sens. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) and John McCain (R-Ariz.) have worked for it, but the objective has been mired in political rhetoric and obstructive tactics at several levels of the political process,” Cardinal O’Malley said in his Globe opinion piece.

The failure to create a new immigration policy “that recognizes the realities of interdependence will multiply human tragedies,” he said.