Evacuated Middlesex inmates to remain in other jails for now

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(Globe photo/Maisie Crow)
Officers move through the flooded floors of the Middlesex County Jail in Cambridge on Sunday.

By Jonathan Saltzman, Globe Staff

Some 193 detainees who were evacuated Sunday from the overcrowded Middlesex Jail after several prisoners flooded the facility will probably not be returning until tomorrow at the earliest, a spokesman for Sheriff James V. DiPaola said today.

The spokesman, Michael Hartigan, said authorities were still working to restore electricity at the Cambridge jail, which had to be shut off after detainees allegedly began smashing sprinkler heads and tearing down pipes around 11:30 a.m. Sunday. The flooding began on
the 18th floor of the high-rise building on Thorndike Street and drenched every floor down to the lobby.

Authorities quickly put 193 of the jail's most-dangerous detainees on buses and transported them to the Middlesex House of Correction in Billerica and to jails in Essex, Norfolk, Plymouth, and Suffolk counties, Hartigan said. Some 203 other detainees remained at the Cambridge jail.

"As of right now, we don't have a time line for their return," Hartigan said of the detainees who were evacuated. "In all likelihood, it won't be today."

He said authorities were still mopping up water and working with NStar to restore power. The jail is currently running on auxiliary power provided by emergency generators.

The vandalism stemmed from fears of swine flu, according to Hartigan. On June 30, a detainee was taken to Massachusetts General Hospital complaining of flu-like symptoms. The detainee was treated and told in discharge papers that he most likely had H1N1 influenza, or swine flu. Upon his return to the jail, he was quarantined and treated with Tamiflu and over-the-counter medicine.

On Saturday, 10 more inmates exhibited flu-like symptoms and were moved to a quarantine unit and also treated with Tamiflu. Two correction officers were also diagnosed with flu.

The next day, inmates who were agitated by the flu outbreak "started acting out, throwing paper and trash," and then tore down sprinkler heads and pipes, DiPaola said during a news conference Sunday.

DiPaola and several lawyers and advocates for prisoners' rights say the underlying problem is overcrowding at the jail.

The facility was built for 161 people but has long exceeded that. Last September, it held 415 detainees, nearly 2 1/2 times its capacity, according to the most recent state Department of Correction report on overcrowding at county jails.

As a result of overcrowding, DiPaola has converted the jail's visiting room, red-brick chapel, indoor gym, and even an occasional hallway into sleeping areas, according to a tour he gave a Globe reporter last year. He has been lobbying the state to build a new jail.

``The fact of the matter is that the jails are brutally overcrowded in Middlesex County," said David W. White Jr., a Boston lawyer. He headed a Massachusetts Bar Association task force that recently recommended the state get rid of some minimum mandatory drug sentences that many critics say have caused massive overcrowding at jails and prisons throughout the state.
