

NJ Muslim leader arrives in Newark for deportation hearing (The Star-Ledger)

NJ Muslim leader arrives in Newark for deportation hearing
by The Star-Ledger Continuous News Desk

Monday June 02, 2008, 8:44 AM

An influential New Jersey Muslim leader is due to take the stand today in his own defense when his deportation hearing resumes in Newark.

File photoDuring a lunch break of his immigration trial last month, Imam Mohammad Qatanani, center, surrounded with the members of his family and supporters.

Mohammad Qatanani arrived by car at 8:20 a.m. at the federal building in Newark.

Dozens of supporters lined the other side of Broad Street, playing music and waving placards and posters. Security was heavy with a mix of Newark police and what appeared to be the imam's staff.

When the imam arrived, the man running the sound system across the street announced: "He's here. Our Imam is here!"

Qatanani has been the imam -- or religious leader -- of the Islamic Center of Passaic County in Paterson since 1996, the year he came to the U.S. on a work visa to lead the mosque. He applied for permanent residency in 1999 for himself, his wife, and the three of his six children who were not born in the United States.

The U.S. government is seeking to deport Qatanani, arguing that he didn't list a prior arrest in Israel on his application -- a disclosure that could disqualify him from getting a green card.

Israeli military authorities said Qatanani admitted to being a member of Hamas -- a group classified as a terrorist organization by the U.S. Government -- during interrogation in 1993 in Israel.

U.S. authorities were unaware of the Israeli incident until Qatanani volunteered the information during a 2005 meeting in which he asked about his green card delay.

Qatanani -- a 44-year-old Palestinian with Jordanian citizenship -- claims he was detained, not arrested, by Israeli authorities.

He also has said such occurrences were routine at the time, and witnesses who testified on Qatanani's behalf -- including law enforcement officials and religious leaders -- say he's a moderate Muslim leader committed to interfaith dialogue.

Meanwhile, Qatanani's lawyers continue to challenge the authenticity of documents that immigration authorities say came from Israel. Immigration Judge Alberto J. Riefkohl has not yet ruled the documents into evidence.

--The Associated Press contributed to this report.