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HEADLINE: Muslim leader agrees to leave United States

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An Orange County mosque leader from Egypt who authorities said had given speeches that could be considered supportive of terrorist organizations agreed Tuesday to leave the United States voluntarily, giving up his fight to remain in the country.

Wagdy Ghoneim is being held at the federal immigration detention center on Terminal Island. As part of the agreement with government attorneys, he avoids deportation in exchange for admitting he was in the United States in violation of his immigration status, said Virginia Kice, a spokeswoman for U.S. Immigration Customs Enforcement.

He must leave the United States by Jan. 7. By agreeing to voluntary removal, Ghoneim, the imam at the Islamic Institute of Orange County, is eligible to reapply for entry into the country.

Ghoneim, 53, was arrested at his Anaheim home last month on an immigration violation, but authorities had declined to disclose details about the case.

At the time, his lawyer and supporters said the arrest was a mistake and that he expected to be released soon.

Ghoneim has been held without bond since then "based upon Department of Homeland Security concerns that his past speeches and participation in fund-raising activities could be supportive of terrorist organizations," Kice said, declining to provide further details.

Muslim leaders say he was hospitalized with chest pains during his detention and that he was handcuffed and chained to his hospital bed. When family members tried to check on his condition, they were reportedly turned away, according to the Council on American Islamic Relations Southern California.

Ghoneim's attorney, Valerie Curtis-Diop, said her client decided he wanted to take voluntary departure, because even if the judge had granted bail the government would have sought to delay any appeal.

"It's a great disappointment," she said. "I anticipated the judge would make a decision today, but she said there was just too much evidence" to weigh.

Curtis-Diop denied ICE presented any credible evidence to back its claims.

"It was a fishing expedition," she said, adding that all of what the government attorneys presented was "hearsay evidence based on unreliable sources."

Kazbek Soobzokov, who also represented Ghoneim, has said the agency's evidence consists of "two Internet, open-source, unauthenticated articles published by 'anti-Muslim zealots.' "

Ghoneim's agreement to leave the country comes a day after Southern California Muslims met

with Rep. Christopher Cox, R-Newport Beach, to protest his detention.

About two dozen Muslims presented a petition with more than 1,000 signatures to Cox, urging him to investigate the arrest of a man described by local Islamic leaders as a respected scholar.

Ghoneim, a native of Egypt, arrived in Detroit in 2001 on a visitor's visa. He was later authorized to remain in the United States on a visa for religious workers until June 20, 2004, according to documents provided to his attorney by Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

His attorney has said that Ghoneim applied for an extension of his visa and was awaiting word when federal agents arrested him.

-- From staff and news services