

Suspect in O'Hare weapons incident facing federal charges

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By Matt O'Connor and Jon Hilkevitch

Tribune staff reporters

A 27-year-old Chicago man was taken back into custody and is to appear today in U.S. District Court to face a federal charge stemming from his weekend arrest for allegedly trying to bring nine knives and other weapons aboard an airliner at O'Hare International Airport, authorities said.

Subash Gurung already had been charged in state court with misdemeanor counts of unlawful use of a weapon, attempting to board an aircraft with dangerous weapons and carrying dangerous weapons after he was arrested just prior to boarding a United Airlines flight to Omaha, Neb., on Saturday night, officials said. He was released Sunday on \$1,000 bail.

Gurung, a native of Nepal, is to appear in federal court this afternoon on a charge of attempting to carry a weapon on an aircraft, a felony, authorities said.

If convicted, Gurung faces up to 10 years in prison and a \$250,000 fine, the FBI said.

In a news release this afternoon, the FBI emphasized there was no allegation the incident was connected to any suspected terrorist activity. The agency also described as "not accurate" published reports Gurung had once lived in the same North Side apartment building as another man now being held as a material witness in the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

Four security workers at O'Hare have been fired and five more have been suspended pending an investigation into why they let Gurung past a security checkpoint after confiscating two folding knives from him, Monique Bond, spokeswoman for the Chicago Department of Aviation, said this morning.

Airline employees in the gate area searched Gurung's carry-on bag and found seven more knives, a Taser stun gun and a can of Mace, police said. It is not known why Gurung was headed to Omaha.

"Something obviously went seriously wrong here, and we're trying to find out if it's the employees' fault," Bond said. "If weapons were confiscated, he should never have been let through security."

The incident is expected to energize the debate whether the federal government should take over security screening at the nation's airports. The Senate has approved a measure that would make security screeners federal employees. The House version adopted Thursday increased federal oversight of the 28,000 screeners, but stopped short of federalizing them.

The nine security workers in the O'Hare incident were employees of Atlanta-based Argenbright Security Inc., the private company that runs United's screening operations at O'Hare, Bond said.

The employees, including one supervisor, have had their airport security badges revoked, Bond said. Officials of the city, United and the Federal Aviation Administration are continuing to investigate the incident, she said.

United spokesman Joe Hopkins wouldn't say why Gurung was searched at the boarding gate but said it was part of the airline's regular security procedures.

"The United employees did a great job of intercepting this guy with the weapons and preventing him from boarding the flight," Hopkins said.

Last month, the FAA and the Transportation Department's inspector general announced an audit of the screeners employed by Argenbright, which operates at 14 airports. Officials alleged Argenbright has failed to adequately check employees' backgrounds.

Gurung was questioned by police and the FBI and released early Sunday. Chicago police and FBI officials conferred about Gurung's arrest, but decided he couldn't be charged with a federal crime because he didn't board the airplane, a police spokesman said Sunday.

The defendant told police he is unemployed and is originally from Nepal. When he was released Sunday, he was told to appear in court Dec. 19 on the state charges.

Gurung recently moved back to Chicago with his brother, Sushil, from Minnesota, said Adam Colfax, superintendent for the apartment building in the 5700 block of North Kenmore Avenue where the Gurung brothers lived until a year ago.

The FBI called "not accurate" published reports Gurung had lived in an apartment in the 1000 block of West Hollywood Avenue, where Ayub Ali Khan once lived. Khan has been detained by authorities as a material witness in the Sept. 11 attacks.

U.S. House Speaker Dennis Hastert, R-Ill., today said officials would not have been able to fire the seven employees if they had enjoyed the civil service protection of federal employees.

But Rep. Jan Schakowsky, D-Ill., declared that the security system would never work unless those running it were federal employees.

"They need to be law enforcement officers, like the Customs Service, like the FBI," she told a meeting at the 911 center.

Tribune staff reporters Tom McCann and Sean D. Hamill and the Associated Press contributed to this report.

