

US deportes 131 Pakistanis in secret airlift

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The US Department of Justice secretly deported 131 Pakistanis aboard a chartered Portuguese jet late last month. The majority of those deported were rounded up in the Bush administration's anti-terror sweep in the wake of September 11, and have been held for months at Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) detention facilities around the country.

INS agents brought the detainees, including 130 men and one woman, from 22 US cities to an airport in Louisiana. According to government officials, 26 had been arrested for immigration violations, 35 had been held on criminal charges and most of the rest had ignored previous deportation orders. None of them faced terrorism-related charges.

According to a Pakistani consular officer, 40 of the deportees expressed vocal opposition as they boarded the flight on June 28. One resisted by lying down on the tarmac and another had to be carried onto the plane. The flight arrived 20 hours later in Islamabad, where the deportees were reportedly questioned briefly by Pakistani officials and released.

The government had originally planned to deport 170 detainees, but 39 obtained court orders blocking their deportation. One man was removed from the flight immediately before departure after his wife obtained a last-minute court order. Thirty unarmed INS agents accompanied the flight, guarding the handcuffed deportees in shifts, standing in aircraft's aisles at every fifth row. The entire operation is estimated to have cost approximately \$500,000.

The deportations were carried out in secret and not even the detainees or their families were informed of the details. Many of those who had reportedly ignored deportation orders had been in the US for many years and were married with children. Many of them were rounded up and held under the new "Absconder Apprehension Initiative" set up since September 11.

Mohammad Akram, a former gas station attendant,

was representative of this group. According to *USA Today*, he had been issued a multiple-entry visa to visit the US, but failed to seek permanent resident status when it expired in 1993. After crossing over the border from Canada during his honeymoon in July 2000, he was briefly detained by US border agents, who told him he would have to appear in immigration court. Akram says he never received a summons. Deported on last month's flight, he now lives in a village in Punjab province, separated from his wife, who remains in Baltimore.

Prior to September 11, such relatively minor immigration violations would have been handled administratively. But since the terror attacks, about 1,200 people, mostly of Arab and South Asian descent, have been rounded up by the government. Many have been held incommunicado, and the Bush administration has repeatedly refused to reveal their identities.

The government has refused to say what, if any, charges have been brought against these individuals, but has admitted that none of them face terrorist charges. The Justice Department has vigorously fought to close deportation hearings to the public and the press. Muslim-American organizations and detainees' relatives report that the government continues to hold even some of those who have agreed to leave the country.

The government has been forcibly repatriating Pakistani deportees since early this year, deporting them in smaller numbers with INS escorts on commercial flights. Pakistani officials, including President Pervez Musharraf, had called on the Bush administration to deport the detainees rather than hold them indefinitely. Pakistani consular officer Ali told the *Washington Post*, "On the human scale, it's a tragedy. But we were left with a Hobbesian choice: Either grant them their freedom or let them languish in jail."

Pakistani Interior Minister Moinuddin Haider

protested to President Bush during a May visit to Washington, saying, “They have not had a fair deal. These people are not criminals and should be treated with more dignity and respect.” INS spokesperson Karen Kraushaar callously defended the government’s actions, telling *USA Today*, “As with any sweep, innocents will be picked up.” She said the INS routinely organizes flight, one or twice a week, when the government deports immigrants from the same country.

Justice Department officials disclosed earlier this month that 73 people remain in federal custody, although civil rights and Arab-American advocates put the figure much higher. An unnamed FBI official told the *Los Angeles Times* that a few dozen terrorist suspects have been taken in as material witnesses and some of them are still being held.

Attorney General John Ashcroft, in testimony last Thursday before the House Select Committee on Homeland Security said, of those rounded up by the government, “417 individuals have been deported for violations of our laws, and “Hundreds more are in the process of being deported.”



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