

Bush civil rights commissioner warns of detention camps for Arab Americans

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A Bush-appointed member of the US Civil Rights Commission cited the mass detention of Japanese Americans during World War II at a Detroit hearing last week and declared that in the event of another terrorist attack on the US, “[N]ot too many people will be crying in their beer if there are more detentions, more stops, more profiling.”

The commission member, Peter Kirsanow, continued: “There will be a groundswell of public opinion to banish civil rights. So the best thing we can do to preserve them is by keeping the country safe.”

Kirsanow was speaking at a public meeting called to hear testimony from Arab-American leaders, who said the Bush administration had violated the civil rights of Arab and Muslim residents since September 11. Witnesses denounced closed-door immigration hearings, secret detentions, racial profiling and coerced interviews of tens of thousands of Arab men as affronts to the democratic rights of Middle Eastern and South Asian immigrants.

Kirsanow is the former head of the right-wing Center for New Black Leadership. He was appointed by Bush to the seven-member commission last year. His response to the testimony in Detroit from Arab-American representatives was to argue they should support Bush’s anti-terrorism program and stop complaining on the grounds that another terror attack linked to Arabs or Muslims would result in far harsher measures.

Should terrorists carry out another attack, he told the meeting, “and they come from the same ethnic group that attacked the World Trade Center, you can forget about civil rights.” Jennifer Braceras, another Bush appointee to the commission, added, “There’s no constitutional right not to be inconvenienced or even embarrassed.”

Kirsanow’s provocative remarks angered many in the audience, who took them, justifiably, as a form of political blackmail. Following the hearing a reporter for the *Detroit Free Press* questioned the commissioner about his reference to mass internment, and Kirsanow reiterated his view that another terrorist attack would produce a “groundswell of opinion” supporting the detention of certain ethnic groups. The commissioner added that he would be “personally opposed” to such action and the Bush administration did not envision it.

White House spokesmen attempted to distance themselves

from Kirsanow’s comments, but defended him against demands from the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) and the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights that he be removed from the commission.

Even as White House officials protested their commitment to the civil rights of Arab Americans, the government was escalating its witch-hunting measures against Middle Eastern and Muslim immigrants. Last Monday the Justice Department announced that it would use criminal penalties against immigrants and foreign visitors who failed to notify the government of a change of address within ten days.

On July 10, agents from the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) and the FBI began conducting sweeps in shopping malls around the country targeting Pakistanis working in jewelry kiosks. Raids took place in Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Atlanta, Dallas and at least one location in Connecticut.

Although no criminal charges have been filed, some of those caught up in the raids are being held for immigration violations, and about 60 people have been questioned. The government’s ostensible reason for the sweeps is to locate people sending money to Pakistan “to fund terror operations.” Since most immigrants in the US send money back home to their families, the government policy puts virtually all Pakistanis living in the US under suspicion of funding terrorism.

Tariq Hussain, a Pakistani native who works at a kiosk in Pittsburgh, told CNN that agents asked him if he had links to Osama bin Laden or knew anyone who did. Agents searched his apartment and, finding photographs he had taken in Times Square while visiting New York as a tourist, demanded to know why he took those pictures. “Are you planning to attack there or something?” they demanded.

The mall sweeps come on the heels of the secret overnight airlift of 131 Pakistanis in handcuffs on June 26 (see “US deports 131 Pakistanis in secret airlift” <http://wsws.org/articles/2002/jul2002/depo-j16.shtml>), in which neither the prisoners nor their families were informed of the details of their impending deportations.

On his arrival in Pakistan, one of the deportees, 35 year-old Mufeed Khan, described his ill treatment during four months in prison: “I was shackled and handcuffed—completely bound—and questioned as if I were an associate of Osama bin Laden. I was

treated as a terrorist. I was psychologically tortured in the prison. I was treated badly because I am a Muslim. Carrying a Muslim name should not be a crime.” Mr. Khan had lived in the United States for 11 years and owned a small business in Los Angeles before he was detained last February on a minor immigration violation.

In addition to the targeting of Pakistani nationals, the US Department of Justice recently issued an internal memo directing the INS and US Customs to “seek out and search all individuals of Yemeni origin including US citizens but excluding individuals with diplomatic status,” according to the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee. An ADC statement reports a number of people being targeted and removed from planes, even after passing through security, then having to wait for hours for INS clearance. “Items have been removed from their luggage without explanation to them. Some individuals have even been handcuffed to poles for hours as officials questioned them.”

Other developments include the following:

* ADC reports simultaneous raids last March on 15 homes, including those of American citizens, in northern Virginia and Georgia. The raids involved 150 law enforcement agents who were part of a special task force created by the Treasury Department. Agencies involved in the raids included the INS, FBI, Customs Service, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms and the US Postal Service. All information regarding the raids was ordered sealed.

* On June 24, Ali Yaghi, a Jordanian citizen who had applied for US residency, was deported with no notice to his family after spending nearly nine months in the Metropolitan Correctional Center in Brooklyn, New York on an immigration charge. His American wife and three children found out about his deportation days afterwards, and, having not heard from him since, fear the Jordanian security forces may have arrested him to continue his interrogations there.

* On July 1, Salman M. Salman, a Syrian-born businessman living in the US since 1981, was denied access to an attorney after being arrested in Florida on questionable charges of owning firearms illegally. The authorities at the Orange County Jail refused to tell Salman where he was being held, saying they were complying with secrecy provisions of post-September 11 anti-terrorism laws.

He was allowed to make a call to his brother, who then called his lawyer, attorney Mark NeJame. NeJame told the *Orlando Sentinel*, “I was lied to,” when he asked if Salman was in the Orange County Jail

*A Moroccan newlywed, Mohamed Aterhzaz, 25, was deported on May 16 because he and his American wife of five months had been unable to afford the \$450 fee required to file for US residency. They both worked on the night shift at a St. Petersburg, Florida Subway sandwich shop, where they met a year ago. On January 2, only a month after getting married, INS agents arrested him for overstaying his visa, which had expired

last October.

Mrs. Aterhzaz, the former Sara Jane Anderson, found a lawyer willing to take their case for no fee, but the INS delayed processing their paperwork until after the 120-day deportation deadline. Prior to September 11, the INS would routinely have allowed Aterhzaz to stay in the US until the application was processed. Immigration experts say that now that Aterhzaz has been deported, even if the application is successful, it could take a year or more before he is allowed to return.

* Twenty-four year-old Hussein al-Attas continues to be held in solitary confinement after 10 months in a New York City prison, even though he has not been accused of any wrongdoing. He is being held under the material witness statute for having briefly shared an apartment in the university town of Norman, Oklahoma with Zacarias Moussaoui, whom the government is prosecuting as the alleged September 11 “twentieth bomber.” Attorneys for al-Attas have been silenced by a federal gag order, and hearings are closed to the public with legal motions sealed.

* In the most recent case of blatant racial profiling, seven armed police escorted 20-year-old Indian film star Samyuktha Verma and six others from their plane when it landed at New York City’s LaGuardia Airport on July 16. A passenger had reported their behavior as “suspicious” when, on their first trip to New York, they excitedly pointed out famous landmarks to each other and switched seats amongst themselves to share window views.

The Bush administration continues to maintain a veil of secrecy over its police-state operations. The government has refused to release the names of people arrested in its dragnets, but has admitted to arresting more than 1,200 Arab and South Asian men, ultimately detaining some 750 people on immigration violations. The majority of these, such as the secretly airlifted 131 Pakistanis, have since been deported. According to figures published in June, 74 foreign nationals are presently being held, but advocacy groups have no way of verifying the numbers without the release of names, and they suspect the numbers may be much higher.



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