

US immigration authorities detain hundreds of Middle Eastern men in Los Angeles

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As many as 700 Iranian, Syrian, Sudanese, Libyan and Iraqi men were arrested in Los Angeles during the week of December 9-16. The men had been ordered to appear at Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) offices for what the US government called a “special registration.” The registration, in which male immigrants from a number of Middle Eastern and predominantly Muslim countries are fingerprinted, photographed, and questioned by the INS, was recently announced by Attorney General John Ashcroft.

Government sources claimed that, as of December 22, most of those detained had been released on bail. The Justice Department refuses to disclose how many are still being held.

Under the registration plan, thousands of lawful visitors are required upon arrival to provide US authorities with fingerprints and to register with the INS after spending 30 days in the country. Visitors who fail to do either of these things face fines and deportation. Most of the immigrants detained in Los Angeles, which has a large Iranian community, were from Iran.

The order applies to all men 16 and older who reside in the United States under nonimmigrant visas and to persons holding dual citizenship. According to an American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) press release, most of those detained in Los Angeles were immigrants who have already been extensively questioned as part of the procedure for obtaining a Green Card, i.e., resident status under US immigration laws.

In most cases the INS arrested men and teenage boys who were guilty of no crime. They were merely waiting for approval of their Green Card applications, or their records showed minor, technical violations.

A 30-year-old student described the interrogation process to the WSWS: “I was led into an office and

asked to provide the names of all my friends, whom I corresponded with, and about my family and our religious practices. I was also asked about my studies. The whole process took over an hour. On the surface all was made to appear very official and professional.

“But the FBI, because of September 11, had already interviewed me last year. At that time my embassy advised me to cooperate. This time there was no choice. A lot of the questions were the same. That’s what made the whole thing very intimidating to me. I have no idea what they already know about me. The INS agent would ask me the same question more than one time, to see if I would answer the same way. All the way home I was worried that I might have left something out that they would later get me on.”

Some of the immigrants showed up with lawyers, but in many cities lawyers were not allowed to accompany their clients. The men then had to show rent records, payroll stubs, and empty their wallets so that the numbers on their credit cards, video rental cards, etc., could be recorded.

Detainees described degrading treatment, with men crowded into INS basement cells, transported to other facilities “belly cuffed”—with their hands chained at the waist—and forced to lie on the floor of detention facilities with the air conditioner cranked up and no blankets and little food. There are accusations that some boys and men were hosed down with cold water. Some immigrants were placed in criminal jails, ostensibly because the INS jails were full.

The 700 Los Angeles detainees represented a quarter of all those who appeared in the course of the week to comply with the Justice Department directive. In other cities, immigrants accused of minor violations were released with a notice to appear for a deportation hearing. In San Diego more than 50 were arrested.

There are reports of at least one arrest in Fresno, California, two in San Francisco and scattered arrests in Minneapolis and Bloomington, Minnesota. In Chicago one person was detained and then released.

A Los Angeles lawyer reported that out of 34 clients that he escorted, 30 were detained. In San Bernardino, California a registrant with a pending labor certification application was detained and bond was set at \$2,500. When he was unable to post bond, he was transferred to a prison in Lancaster, about 50 miles away, and then to Los Angeles. When his wife and attorney attempted to post bail, they were told the INS had no record of the person in question.

The current wave of registrations is only the first in a series ordered by the Justice Department. The second interrogation deadline targets immigrants from 13 other countries: people from Afghanistan, Algeria, Bahrain, Eritrea, Lebanon, Morocco, North Korea, Oman, Qatar, Somalia, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen are to report by January 10. A third group has until February 21 and includes Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.

According to ACLU estimates, the second wave of interrogations could result in the arrest of tens of thousands. "Given the evidence, there is no alarmism in saying this is a round-up," said Lucas Guttentag, director of the ACLU's Immigrants' Rights Project. "Attorney General Ashcroft is using the immigrant registration program to lock up people who already have provided extensive information as part of their Green Card applications," he said. "Therefore, the purpose is clearly not to get information, but rather to selectively arrest, detain and deport Middle Eastern and Muslim men in the United States."

On December 17 some 1,000 Iranians rallied in Los Angeles to protest the mass arrests, comparing the registrations and detentions to the internment of Japanese and Japanese-Americans during World War II. The next day there were protests in nearby Buena Park, in Orange County. Protesters held signs denouncing Ashcroft as a dictator and asking whether concentration camps would be next. An activist at the Los Angeles demonstration said local jails were so overcrowded that the immigrants might be sent to Arizona, where they could face weeks or months in prison awaiting hearings before immigration judges, or deportation.



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