

# One million names on US government “terrorist” watch list

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One million people—including large numbers of American citizens—are on the US government’s so-called terrorist watch list, according to the American Civil Liberties Union, which held a Washington, D.C. press conference earlier this week to mark the ominous milestone.

Since February of this year the ACLU has maintained an online “watch list counter” to track the size of the government’s watch list. A September 2007 report by the inspector general of the Justice Department reported that the list contained 700,000 names and was growing by 20,000 per month. As of this writing, the counter has passed the 1,001,500 mark.

The Terrorist Screening Center (TSC) was set up in December 2003 through a Homeland Security directive signed by President George W. Bush, who ordered the agency to consolidate more than a dozen separate terrorist watch lists maintained by different federal agencies.

The resulting Terrorist Screening Database (TSDB) has been used to detain thousands of people during airport security checks or bar them from flying. Foreign nationals have been held up at US border crossings and prevented from obtaining visas based on the list. Local law enforcement agencies have also accessed the database during routine traffic stops.

Thousands of innocent people have been caught up in the government’s arbitrary dragnet and “no-fly” lists; many held for hours in interrogation rooms, threatened and denied due process. Those on the list have no right to access and challenge the data in which the list is based.

“Members of Congress, nuns, war heroes and other ‘suspicious characters,’ with names like Robert Johnson and Gary Smith, have become trapped in the Kafkaesque clutches of this list, with little hope of

escape,” said Caroline Fredrickson, director of the ACLU Washington Legislative Office.

The ACLU said those on the list included South African leader Nelson Mandela; Evo Morales, president of Bolivia; and US Senator Edward Kennedy, Democrat from Massachusetts.

Appearing at the press conference was Akif Rahman, a computer consulting company founder from suburban Chicago, who was detained and questioned for more than two hours by US customs officials on four separate occasions when crossing the Canadian border. On one occasion, he was held for 5 ½ hours, shackled to a chair, and physically searched. He was also separated from his wife and children who were forced to wait in a small dirty public area without food or telephones. A US citizen born in Springfield Illinois, Rahman is being represented by the ACLU of Illinois in a lawsuit over this treatment.

A flight from London carrying Yusuf Islam, the pop star formerly known as Cat Stevens, was diverted and forced to land in Maine once the government realized he was aboard. The singer was barred from entering the United States.

Attorney David C. Nelson is one of many men named David Nelson around the US who has been caught up on the list, including a former star of the television show “Ozzie and Harriet.”

The ACLU reported that the list even contained Saddam Hussein’s name, although he was imprisoned in Baghdad and in US custody at the time. It also contained the names of several 9/11 hijackers long after they were killed.

Barry Steinhardt, director of the ACLU’s Technology and Liberty Program, said, “America’s new million record watch list is a perfect symbol for what’s wrong with this administration’s approach to security: it’s

unfair, out-of-control, a waste of resources, treats the rights of the innocent as an afterthought, and is a very real impediment in the lives of millions of travelers in this country. It must be fixed without delay.

“Putting a million names on a watch list is a guarantee that the list will do more harm than good by interfering with the travel of innocent people and wasting huge amounts of our limited security resources on bureaucratic wheel-spinning,” said Steinhardt. “I doubt this thing would even be effective at catching a real terrorist.”

In the name of the “war on terror”, the Bush Administration has gone a long way in setting up the structure of a police state. The state surveillance being conducted against more than one million people is not aimed at protecting the American people from terror attacks. It will ultimately be used to track political opponents, particularly as popular opposition grows to the worsening social conditions confronting tens of millions of working people, to the attacks on democratic rights, and the war

The ACLU concluded its press conference by expressing hope that the “next president” would move quickly to fix the excesses carried out by the Bush administration. Any confidence that a Barack Obama White House will dismantle the repressive measures put in place by Bush is an illusion.

Obama has fully embraced the war on terror—both in regards to foreign and domestic policy. He signaled his support for the attack on democratic rights through his Senate vote last week backing the Bush administration’s illegal program of widespread electronic surveillance and wiretapping.



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