

ICE seizes and holds Korean-American scientist and legal US resident incomunicado

Kevin Reed
29 July 2025

On July 21, Tae Heung “Will” Kim—a 40-year-old Korean American scientist and longtime US legal permanent resident—was detained by immigration authorities at San Francisco International Airport.

Kim, who has lived in the US since age five and is currently pursuing a PhD at Texas A&M University focusing on Lyme disease vaccine research, was returning from a two-week visit to South Korea where he had attended his younger brother’s wedding.

Upon landing in San Francisco, Kim was taken to secondary screening and abruptly detained by Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and then by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) for at least a week.

Despite holding a valid green card and being a legal permanent resident for 35 years, Kim has since been held incomunicado with ICE denying him access to both his attorney and direct communication with his family.

Kim’s attorney Eric Lee stressed that neither he nor Kim’s family have received any meaningful explanation for the detention, except for a brief and cryptic message from Kim’s phone—presumed to be texted by ICE with Kim present—that simply replied, “Don’t worry about it” when his family asked about his wellbeing.

The denial of Kim’s right to consult with his lawyer or freely communicate with his loved ones is a blatant violation of due process and constitutional protections. Attorney Eric Lee reached out to officials repeatedly, only to be rebuffed. Lee was told at one point flatly by a CBP supervisor, “Don’t bother calling back.”

When Lee inquired if the protections of the Fifth and Sixth Amendments—which guarantee the right to due

process and counsel—applied, the CBP supervisor replied: “No.”

In a statement on Monday, Lee explained:

If the Constitution doesn’t apply to somebody who’s lived in this country for 35 years and is a green-card holder—and only left the country for a two-week vacation—that means the government is basically arguing that the Constitution doesn’t apply to anybody who’s been in this country for less time than him.

Lee stressed that the government’s position, if accepted by the courts, would decimate fundamental constitutional doctrines protecting even legal residents, and set a chilling precedent for millions of immigrants in the US.

Tae Heung Kim immigrated to the US from South Korea with his family at the age of five and was raised and educated in America. His mother is now a US citizen. Kim built a distinguished academic record culminating in his current research as a PhD candidate in biomedical sciences at Texas A&M University, where he works on developing a vaccine for Lyme disease—potentially lifesaving research with broad public benefit.

Kim’s only prior run-in with the law was in 2011, for a minor marijuana possession charge in Texas. He fulfilled his community service requirements, successfully petitioned to have the incident expunged from his public record, and continued to live an exemplary life.

According to attorney Lee, it is highly unusual for immigration authorities to use such a minor, sealed offense as grounds for detention, especially as existing waiver processes routinely overlook such cases as a matter of common sense and the public good.

Kim's family, including his mother and younger brother, have been left anguished and bewildered by his sudden disappearance into an ICE dungeon. Apart from one brief, possibly supervised, call to his mother, all efforts to communicate directly have been blocked.

Lee and the family have been denied any official explanation for why Kim has been singled out for such harsh treatment; the only alleged "justification" investigators have been able to uncover is the long-ago, minor marijuana case.

Members of Kim's family, speaking through advocates and in press statements, have emphasized his dedication to public service, his American upbringing and the deeply traumatic impact of his incarceration. They say his research "could help save countless lives," and that this hardline approach by ICE "tears families apart for no just cause."

Tae Heung Kim's persecution is part of an ongoing crackdown on foreign-born scientists and researchers by the Trump administration. The campaign is being justified as a matter of "national security" and has targeted multiple academic institutions.

Earlier this year, similar tactics were used against Turkish-born Tufts University student Rümeysa Öztürk, who was detained for months after criticizing her university's investment policies, and against Russian-born Harvard scientist Kseniia Petrova, accused of technical violations related to her research.

Federal scrutiny has particularly intensified towards the University of Michigan, where two Chinese researchers have been charged with smuggling biological materials. The Trump administration has also brought a wider investigation into foreign funding and alleged "technology theft" at US universities with research links to China.

These efforts have coincided with pressure from Republican lawmakers to sever global research connections and increased enforcement of disclosures and partnerships, often with little evidence but invoking fears of scientific "sabotage" and espionage.

The detention of Tae Heung Kim has dangerous implications and is part of the Trump administration's

increasingly authoritarian and xenophobic orientation aimed at diverting the attention of the public away from social inequality and the crimes being committed against the public by the capitalist oligarchy in the drive for profit and wealth accumulation for a handful of billionaires.

By holding a well-established scientist, legal resident and community member incommunicado—denying him constitutional rights and stonewalling his attorneys—the fascists in the White House and Congress are attempting to open cracks in due process which can be used against anyone including native-born US citizens. It is also aimed at undermining scientific inquiry and international academic research cooperation.

As attorney Eric Lee stated, "This is a brutal attack on immigrants & science. Free Will!"

Kim's situation, unless reversed by the mobilization of mass opposition, threatens to become a new normal for foreign-born researchers and their families. It is imperative that workers, students and academics in the US and internationally demand his immediate release and an end to the criminalization of those who have committed no crime other than to contribute to science and live in peace with their families.



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