

Raids sow fear, resentment in immigrant neighborhood;

U.S. agents, looking for illegal residents, terrorists and other criminals, have scooped up Pakistanis in a South Phila. area.

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Body

The day before Independence Day, Assan Ullah awoke at his usual 6 a.m. and looked out his window at an increasingly common scene: U.S. agents in the street, arresting more of his Pakistani brethren.

Splintered hinges and boot-marked doors remained a week after seven men were seized in the federal raid, the latest of several that neighbors say are now familiar, fearsome events in this South Philadelphia immigrant neighborhood since Sept. 11.

"If they did something criminal, then they should spend their lives in jail," Ullah said of his detained neighbors. "But most of these people aren't doing anything wrong. They're just here trying to work."

Whether targeting criminals, terrorists or ordinary illegal immigrants, the sweeps have sown fear and resentment in this bedraggled stretch of South Seventh Street. Ten months after the terror attacks, apprehension may have eased for most Americans, but it persists relentlessly for this cluster of a few hundred Pakistani Muslims.

Nobody can remember so much suspicion, so much daily anxiety in the neighborhood that has been home to many waves of immigrants from many lands. Pakistanis say they are just eking out a living like thousands of other immigrants in the city - documented and not - often sharing small apartments with vague acquaintances and saving money to send back home.

Sprinkled in a neighborhood dominated by Cambodian newcomers, the Pakistanis still grumble about the days last spring when federal agents stood at one corner and singled out passersby for their immigration papers.

"I've lived here for 20 years and never saw anybody else have this problem," said Irshad Aslam, 52, a U.S. citizen and neighborhood grocer whose tiny Aslam Market caters mostly to Cambodians. "They asked for everybody's papers - everybody but the Cambodians."

For most Americans, the greatest inconvenience from antiterror measures has been longer queues at flight check-ins. For the immigrants who have braved crime and neglect to keep this neighborhood alive, it has meant living under constant scrutiny and scrambling to find a way to send money home. In a post-Sept. 11 crackdown, their network of private financial agents, known as hundi, has been largely dismantled.

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"People are very scared," said Mohammad Sardar Khan, 50, who said he would speak publicly only because he is a U.S. citizen. "They don't go outside most of the time."

A spokeswoman for the Immigration and Naturalization Service, Niki Edwards, confirmed that federal agents had made a number of unpublicized arrests in the neighborhood in the last year.

"People have been picked up there. I cannot say how many," Edwards said.

She said agents are looking for undocumented immigrants, with a priority on criminal and terror suspects.

"We do not target any specific [ethnic] group. And I do not believe there is any special attention on this neighborhood," Edwards said, giving no other details.

Unlike their Cambodian neighbors, the Pakistanis do not advertise their presence. Small signs mark the stores where cumin and basmati rice can be bought by the bagful. Five times a day, many Muslims stop their work to pray in their homes and stores, some with U.S. flags fluttering from the windows.

In Sardar Khan's tiny apartment, where one room serves as bedroom, office and living room, a large photograph on a wall depicts his beloved homeland, a valley in the Northwest Frontier of Pakistan called Swat. By unfortunate coincidence, that province is also where al-Qaeda members, even Osama bin Laden, may be regrouping.

Pakistanis also were among dozens of immigrants arrested in the last month at jewelry kiosks in malls nationwide, including one in Philadelphia, in a search for al-Qaeda money-laundering operations.

But in this neighborhood, Pakistanis scorn terrorists even as they lament the arrests. According to Sardar Khan - a sort of neighborhood watchdog - at least 16 people have been taken away in three or four sweeps of the area since Sept. 11. At least 10 men have been deported for immigration violations, he said.

Edwards could not verify the numbers. But she and other federal officials did confirm the latest raid, on July 3. Agents from the INS, FBI and U.S. Marshals Service swarmed into one block in four trucks, two of which were unmarked with tinted windows, neighbors recalled.

According to the spokesmen, marshals were acting on a warrant for one man wanted on 1997 charges of distributing heroin in Texas. Tagging along, the INS and FBI took the chance to grab everybody else sharing the man's apartment and an adjoining one.

The man targeted by the raid is being held on drug charges. Six others are being held on possible immigration violations, authorities said.

An eighth roommate, who was away during the raid and not picked up, was shoveling clothes into a garbage bag a week later and getting ready to leave the sacked apartment.

"I can't afford the rent [alone], so I have to move to another house," said the man, who showed a reporter his valid work permit but still asked that his name not be printed. "They cut the phone line... . They took my passport."

FBI Special Agent Joseph Majarowitz said the arrests were "made possible by investigators following up on good information. It wasn't based on any profiling... . That's all I can say at this point."

Like unpredictable squalls, the detentions have frustrated the neighbors and left many expressing a mixture of resentment and support for this country. Mahmood Qureshi, a shop owner who bemoans the arrests, has put up a red-white-and-blue poster with the words "United We Stand."

"They help the Americans, they take jobs they don't do anymore," Qureshi, 54, who came from Punjab two decades ago, said of the immigrant workers. "So now, they're arresting these people?"

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Mohammad S. Khan, a Pakistani political refugee and former neighborhood resident, said that up to 40 percent of Pakistanis might be working and living here illegally. But he asserted that the total number is tiny compared with other ethnic groups.

"There are... people from Mexico around here. They're illegal immigrants too, but they're not being arrested," he said.

Sardar Khan, the neighborhood watchdog, said he was proud that his homeland has become "a key ally, it's a frontline ally for the United States. But here, if one person is bad, they think we're all bad."

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