

## **U.S. BOLSTERS SCREENING OF LIKELY SUSPECTS;**

## **ASHCROFT ASSAILS REPORT OF MIDWEST ARRESTS**

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### **Body**

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WASHINGTON -- Attorney General John **Ashcroft** announced Wednesday sweeping changes in immigration policy, including how a new task force will prevent terrorists from entering the **United States** and track them down if they do.

"These measures form one part of the concentrated strategy to prevent terrorist attacks," **Ashcroft** said, "by taking **suspected** terrorists off the street."

The Foreign Terrorist Tracking Task Force, led by Steven McCraw, an assistant director of the FBI's Intelligence Branch, will have this key objective: Make sure that federal agencies -- the FBI, Immigration and Naturalization Service, CIA, State Department and Customs Service -- share vital information.

**Ashcroft** said he did not have knowledge of a Knight Ridder **report** Tuesday that police and INS officials had questioned and released six Middle Eastern men in the **Midwest** who had been carrying information about strategic **U.S.** energy sources -- including Florida nuclear plants and the Trans-Alaska pipeline.

"That's a story and nothing more," **Ashcroft** said. "I don't have any reason to believe it to be true. It was noted (in the story) that I had responded emotionally to this situation, when, as a matter of fact, I hadn't even known about the situation."

A senior law enforcement official told Knight Ridder on Wednesday that the information on the six men was in the classified Daily Threat **Report** earlier this week, which is compiled from different sources by the Counter-Terrorism Center at the CIA and distributed to selected officials at the FBI and other agencies.

The official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said police released the men after the INS determined they were in the **United States** legally and had valid Israeli passports.

Russ Bergeron, INS spokesman in Washington, issued a statement that said "the INS and the FBI have thoroughly researched the story published today in the Miami Herald and other Knight Ridder newspapers. Both INS and the FBI believe this **report** is totally false. Neither INS nor the FBI has any record of any kind of such encounter or any incident that even remotely resembles such an encounter this past weekend."

Bergeron said the "FBI has stated unequivocally that they have issued no bulletin or alert out looking for these six men who were allegedly involved in this incident."

An FBI spokesman in Washington, who asked not to be identified, said: "We are completely unaware of the information."

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**Ashcroft's** latest effort to coordinate federal agencies comes after a round of congressional hearings disclosed that many of the 19 hijackers, even those with known links to terrorist networks, entered with legal student or visitor visas.

The hearings also disclosed that federal agencies that **screen** and process immigrants are not connected by computer networks to share information.

**Ashcroft** said the task force will coordinate information so that if the CIA knows that someone who applies for a student visa is a terrorist, the State Department will have access to that information and deny the application.

The State Department also will be tasked with **screening** visa applicants overseas more closely. Suspicious applicants will have to undergo "security advisory opinions and background investigations by the FBI and CIA."

Under the new **U.S.** Patriot Act, signed into law by President Bush last week, visas will be denied to applicants who are members of groups that endorse terrorist activity and anyone who has provided "material support to designated terrorist organizations," **Ashcroft** said.

The Justice Department has an extensive list of terrorist groups. It named 46 of them Wednesday, including the Palestinian and Turkish Hezbollah, the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group and the Islamic Deterrence Force.

### Notes

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THE WAR ON TERRORISM

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