

Those awaiting deportation to Mideast must wait on war

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Body

U.S. immigration authorities have canceled flights taking deportees back to parts of the Middle East during the war with Iraq.

"Under threat-level orange, we're reviewing all scheduled 'removal missions,' " or deportations, said Karen Kraushaar, a spokeswoman for the Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, now a part of the Department of Homeland Security.

She said flights to areas of conflict or where there were State Department advisories against travel had been and would be canceled. Concern for the fate of government officers who might be escorting deportees back to their home countries prompted the move, in part, she said.

"The concern is not only for the officers but the deportees themselves, and the crew on board the airplane," she said. "We don't send people into harm's way, period."

Airlines have also been canceling flights to Dubai, Beirut, and other destinations in the Middle East. But for the detainees, some of whom have been in county jails and detention facilities for many months, the policy could mean more jail time.

Saleh Hamze, a Lebanese nightclub manager from Queens who had expected to be deported within the week, said he was told by his deportation officer that would not happen until the conflict in Iraq ended.

"Osama bin Laden made a mistake, and we pay for it," he said in a collect call from the Hudson County Correctional Facility in New Jersey. "Saddam Hussein made a mistake, and we pay for it now, too."

"We're not asking the government to release us," he said. "Just deport us."

Another Lebanese detainee - his lawyer, Jerry Gonzalez, asked that his name be withheld - was supposed to leave for Beirut with a government escort Wednesday, the day the United States started its strike on Baghdad.

Gonzalez said the flight was canceled Tuesday.

His client accepted deportation a week after being arrested in January. He had gone to an immigration office in New York City, where he works as a salesman in a store, to register as part of a post-Sept. 11 effort to keep track of foreign nationals in the United States.

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Authorities accused him of marriage fraud. Rather than risk a criminal conviction, he agreed to leave the country.

"If I fought it, he'd wallow here," Gonzalez said.

"He just wants to go home. That's all he's wanted to do, is go home, since the day he was arrested," he said. "Now he's stuck."

Both Hamze and Gonzalez's client are noncriminal detainees. They are among more than a thousand people, mainly men, rounded up after the Sept. 11 attacks for immigration violations such as overstaying visas.

Hundreds nationwide have been held for more than a year, many in county jails that contract with the immigration bureau for bed space.

Hamze has been held for months. His daughter, a U.S. citizen, was born while he was in jail.

Amy Gottlieb, director of the Immigrant Rights Project at the American Friends Service Committee in Newark, voiced concern about any policy that would lead to noncriminal detainees being locked up longer.

"What we are seeing is just longer and longer detention of people," she said. "And I would put forth, the INS should consider releasing people if they're not going to be able to remove them as they're supposed to."

Gonzalez said that he could see how "it might not be the wisest thing" now to send deportation officers to geopolitical hot spots.

Kraushaar would not specify which countries were affected by the review. Immigration attorneys reported that Syrian clients were told there would be no deportations during the war.

After Sept. 11, immigration officials canceled deportation flights for several months.

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