

In the Moments Before Deportation, Holding On to Hope

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Highlight: At the Habib house in Woodside, Queens, friends and family gathered hours before the government was scheduled to order the mother, Nazmin, and daughter, Nadia, to return to Bangladesh, even as the father and three children were allowed to stay.

Body

With shoes piled at the entranceway, the Habib house in Woodside, Queens, appeared to be having a celebration Wednesday night - teenagers drew on bright paper on the living room floor; women in headscarves and flowing salwar kameez dresses passed out cupcakes after a hearty meal of chicken biryani; kids bounced on leather couches and swung miniature American flags.

Nadia Habib, a 19-year-old with a shining nose stud representing both her Bengali culture and youthful style, munched on a Burger King fish sandwich. Her brother Naiem Habib, 17, made a joke about a smudged poster reading "We are all immigrants."

"It's not like people are going to focus on the sign and say, 'oh that looks kind of bad, we're going to deport her!' " Naiem said.

Nadia laughed. But to the 40 friends and family members at the Habibs - and to 6,000 other people around the country who have signed a petition on their behalf - the deportation to Bangladesh of Nadia Habib and her mother, Nazmin Habib, scheduled for 11:30 a.m. Thursday, seems almost as arbitrary as a smudged sign.

The family immigrated to the United States in 1993. The father, Jawad Habib, a taxi driver, has his green card. Nadia's three younger siblings were born here and are citizens. But Nadia -- who left Bangladesh when she was 20 months old -- and her mother overstayed a tourist visa and are not legal residents.

Ever since an order was issued in 2000 for mother and daughter's removal, the family says they have been trying to appeal and seek political asylum. Their case has never been reopened, but Immigration and Customs Enforcement never enforced the ruling - until last month.

The Habibs' lawyer, Aygul Charles, noted that new government policies focus on deporting immigrants with criminal records first (the Habibs have none). Ms. Charles filed a request Monday to block the deportation but says she has not gotten a reply.

A spokesman for Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Luis Martinez, would not comment directly on the case, but he said ICE focused its efforts on convicted criminals, who represented over half of last year's deportations.

So the Habibs haven't given up hope.

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Though asked to arrive at Federal Plaza ready for departure on Thursday, Nadia Habib and her mother brought no suitcases for their **deportation** date, when they arrived at 10 a.m. Outside the building, protesters rallied to urge the government to let them stay.

Wednesday night on the terrace of the Habibs' brick apartment house, Jawad Habib watched rain drip off white roses. "My daughter's my heart," he said. "How could I live without her?"

Inside, as Nadia and her friends made signs, she fielded an endless string of calls from friends, family members and reporters. "Are you coming to the rally?" she'd ask. Every night, she said: "I've broken down and cried. But you have to keep yourself together."

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