

Monitoring immigrant sign-ups

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Body

On a day when Bay Area activists began **monitoring** the detentions of **immigrants** who registered under a new national security program, Mohamed Harizi went to the San Francisco INS office ready to be jailed.

Harizi, 25, believed his expired student visa might deliver a fate similar to that of hundreds of other Muslim and Arab men who were detained after they complied with a government order for men and boys from mostly Muslim countries to be fingerprinted, photographed and interviewed.

He had heard the cells were cold, so Harizi wore thermal underwear and a turtle neck sweater. He had heard metal objects were prohibited in jail, so he didn't wear a belt or a watch. Instead, he brought two friends, who had instructions to pay bills, call his family in Tunisia and coordinate with a lawyer.

But he wasn't detained. The Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) asked him to return in a week with more paperwork.

Although Harizi fears deportation, the former Sonoma State University student hopes for some way to remain in the United States legally.

"I don't know what will happen later," Harizi said.

The effort to closely track **immigrant** men and boys from mostly Middle Eastern and Muslim countries is having seismic effects on the immigration system, heavily criticized after Sept. 11, 2001, for lax enforcement of the law. But now part of the INS strategy to strengthen its control involves trying to target primarily Muslims and Arabs.

INS officials say they are doing their job at a time where national security is at grave risk and with the knowledge that the Sept. 11 hijackers were in the United States on the same kind of visitor visas now needing special registration. Hundreds have been detained since last month, many of them because of expired visas.

Activists have assailed the registration and detention process as a bait-and-switch tactic in which **immigrants** are punished by one law for complying with another.

The INS has refused to disclose details of the detention process -- including figures on how many have been detained, what countries they're from and the reasons for detainment -- prompting activists to begin Monday's ad hoc accounting of those registrants who entered the San Francisco INS office.

"When there's secrecy, there's no accountability," said Heba Nimr, an attorney with the INS Watch-La Raza Centro Legal, a San Francisco non-profit group that **monitors** INS enforcement activity. Nimr said the unofficial accounting was also meant to show solidarity with **immigrant** groups required to register. "I don't understand what's so threatening about public information."

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Department of Justice spokesman Jorge Martinez said that the detentions are done only to make sure those **immigrants** who have violated immigration law don't also turn up on a national law enforcement database. Of the thousands who have registered, Martinez said, at least 23 turned up on the criminal database, including some convicted felons and others who were wanted by police.

Inside the San Francisco INS office Monday, the mood ranged from nervousness to anxiety to frustration as dozens of Muslim men waited to be registered.

Mabrook Alagi came through the registration without being detained. But the Yemeni **immigrant**, who is married to an American citizen, was angry.

"Why do they ask for some countries and not others?" asked Alagi, 33, who works as a cashier and lives in Oakland. "Why do they ask only for Arabs and nobody else?"

Khemais Boujema, 25, a Tunisian who is studying hotel management at San Francisco State, said, "It's wrong to hold entire nations accountable" because of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

For Harizi, the Tunisian who came dressed for jail, coming to register was the latest blow to his dream of being a student in the United States. After coming to Sonoma State on a student visa in the spring of 2000, Harizi dropped out when his family could no longer afford the **\$12,000-a-year tuition**.

Without school, his visa became invalid, but Harizi hoped his family could save enough to send him back after a semester off.

The terrorist attacks of Sept. 11 forever changed the rules of immigration. Three of the 19 hijackers were discovered to have expired visas. And all 19 were in the United States on non-**immigrant** visas: tourist, student and work.

Visa holders from 19 mostly Muslim and Arab countries are the ones asked to register with the INS now. They will be asked to come back to re-register annually.

With a one-week reprieve from his immigration fate, Harizi was left in the lurch.

"It gives me another chance, another week to be stressing."

Immigrants coming in for special registration can seek free legal advice from the National Lawyers' Guild at (415) 285-1041.

For more information about the registration process, go to www.ins.gov

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