

Justice Dept. to Probe New INS Visa Error; Ashcroft 'Outraged' at Norfolk Incident Involving 4 Pakistanis Who Disappeared

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Byline: Cheryl W. Thompson, Washington Post Staff Writer

Body

The **Justice** Department has launched an investigation into the Immigration and Naturalization Service and why an immigration official improperly allowed four **Pakistani** crewman -- who have now **disappeared** -- to come ashore.

Attorney General John D. **Ashcroft** said he is "**outraged**" by the **INS** and that an agency official **involved in the incident** has been reassigned.

William Bittner, a longtime **INS** employee who oversees the agency's **Norfolk** field office, has been reassigned to the Arlington office, an **INS** official said.

"Individuals are entitled to get **visas** from time to time, but I am not confident at all -- as a matter of fact, I believe that these **visas** were granted **in** a way which violated the regulations, that appropriate precautions were not taken," **Ashcroft** told "Fox News Sunday."

The **incident** began a week ago, when a Russian ship flying a Maltese flag arrived **in Norfolk**. The 27 crew members, 19 of whom were **Pakistani**, were granted a special waiver that allowed them off the ship, according to an **INS** official. When the ship sailed for Savannah, Ga., two days later, four of the crewmen were missing.

An **INS** official acknowledged yesterday that an agency inspector failed to follow protocol before issuing the waivers, including getting a senior-level administrator to sign off on the waiver allowing the crewmen to enter the country without first obtaining a **visa** from the last port of call.

An inspector also entered an improper birth date for one of the four missing **Pakistanis**. If the birth date had been entered correctly, **INS** would have found that the man had committed an immigration violation **in** Chicago several years ago, the **INS** official said. The **error** was not realized until the man **disappeared**, according to the official.

The latest **incident** comes on the heels of the **INS**'s belated mailing of student **visa** approval notices to two dead Sept. 11 hijackers.

"What's happened **in** the **INS** is enough to drive a man to drink," **Ashcroft** said.

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