

IMMIGRATION // Dead terrorists earn U.S. student visas

St. Petersburg Times (Florida)

March 13, 2002, Wednesday, 0 South Pinellas Edition

Copyright 2002 Times Publishing Company

Section: NATIONAL; Pg. 1A

Length: 715 words

Byline: MIKE BRASSFIELD; CHUCK MURPHY

Body

Six months after **terrorists** flew jetliners into the World Trade Center towers, a Florida flight school that trained two of the hijackers received some surprising paperwork in the mail:

The **dead** hijackers' **student visas** had finally been approved by the federal government.

The bureaucratic fiasco prompted intense criticism Tuesday of the **Immigration** and Naturalization Service, an agency under considerable scrutiny since Sept. 11. The post-mortem **visas** reflect a bloated INS bureaucracy repeatedly exploited by **terrorists**, critics said.

"Every time you think you've heard the worst that can possibly happen, something worse happens. It's hard to even respond to it, it's just so bad," said **U.S.** Rep. Bob Barr, R-Ga., who added the INS should be "overhauled from top to bottom."

VISAS13

The two **terrorists** believed to have been at the controls of the planes that hit the World Trade Center towers were 33-year-old Mohamed Atta, thought to be the ringleader of the Sept. 11 attacks, and Marwan al-Shehhi, his 23-year-old cousin. None of the other hijackers on the planes that hit the towers was known to have had pilot training.

For several months in 2000, Atta and al-Shehhi were **student** pilots at Huffman Aviation, a flight school in Venice, 60 miles south of the Tampa Bay area. They applied for **student visas** in August 2000.

On Monday - 19 months later - Huffman Aviation received mailed notices that the INS had approved Atta's and al-Shehhi's **student visas**. The documents changed the **dead** men's legal status from tourists to **student** pilots and cleared them to take pilot lessons.

Rudi Dekkers, the school's owner, was stunned.

Dekkers, who faced scrutiny from the FBI and the media after Sept. 11 for admitting the two **students** to his school, said the forms prove he followed the law.

"What is odd to me is that the **visas** were approved six months after they left (the school)," Dekkers said. "It's very strange. I have no idea why it took so long."

INS spokesman Russ Bergeron acknowledged the late-arriving **visa** approvals were "certainly embarrassing" and "regrettable." He said a data-entry backlog caused the delay.

While the paperwork for Atta and al-Shehhi didn't arrive at Huffman until Monday, the **visas** were actually approved by the INS in July and August of 2001, about a year after the men applied.

IMMIGRATION // Dead terrorists earn U.S. student visas

"At the time, there was no information made available to INS regarding these people and their link to terrorism," Bergeron said.

He said the INS notified the men and the school last summer about the approvals. He described the paperwork Huffman received this week as "backup notification."

An INS clerk issued the visas Oct. 1, 2001, three weeks after the attacks, either not recognizing or ignoring the names on the forms. It wasn't clear Tuesday why it took another five months for the visa approvals to be mailed out.

A contractor handles data entry and mails out notifications for the INS, Bergeron said. But the company wasn't told the data entry and notification for Atta and al-Shehhi was no longer necessary.

Atta and al-Shehhi had been in the United States on tourist visas. Foreign students are generally allowed to study in the United States as long as they apply for student visas, Bergeron said.

He said the tardy letters show "the current process for collecting information and tracking information on students doesn't work."

The INS is testing an Internet-based tracking system designed to keep a closer watch on foreign students and provide instant notification of visa changes. It is uncertain when the system will be fully operational.

The incident provoked howls of outrage Tuesday from Capitol Hill.

"This shows once again the complete incompetence of the immigration service to enforce our laws and protect our borders," said Rep. James Sensenbrenner, R-Wis., who has co-sponsored legislation to break up the agency. "If you look at the chronology of this, it shows why the INS has to be dismantled and put back together again."

Rep. Elton Gallegly, R-Calif., a member of the House subcommittee that oversees immigration issues, said the INS had no excuse because Atta's face had been on television after Sept. 11 "more than the president."

- Information from Times wires and the Venice Gondolier was used in this report.

Graphic

PHOTO, (3); Mohamed Atta; Marwan al-Shehhi; Vote-counting begins in Zimbabwe elections.

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Subject: PASSPORTS & VISAS (92%); HIJACKING (92%); FLIGHT SCHOOLS (90%); US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (90%); TERRORISM (90%); APPROVALS (89%); SEPTEMBER 11 ATTACK (89%); CITIZENSHIP (78%); DELAYS & POSTPONEMENTS (78%); STUDENTS & STUDENT LIFE (78%); IMMIGRATION (77%); US CONGRESS (77%)

Company: BAY AREA INSURANCE SERVICES (54%); BAY AREA INSURANCE SERVICES (54%); IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (90%); IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (58%)

IMMIGRATION // Dead terrorists earn U.S. student visas

Organization: IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (90%); IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (58%)

Industry: FLIGHT SCHOOLS (90%); AIRCRAFT PILOTS (90%)

Geographic: TAMPA, FL, USA (79%); FLORIDA, USA (79%)

Load-Date: March 13, 2002

End of Document