

Carter to participate in naturalization ceremony

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Body

As a child in Bangladesh, Esma Ponir would listen to his father talk about the importance of education and the opportunities available to Americans. Only in America, he said, could a Georgia peanut farmer become president.

"He would say, 'Look at this guy. He has a peanut farm. Look at that. Over there you can go from that to be the president,' " said Ponir, a 33-year-old computer programmer.

Ponir hopes to meet that former peanut farmer today. Ponir is one of 80 people from 20 countries who will become citizens in a **naturalization ceremony** at the **Carter** Center. Former President Jimmy **Carter** is scheduled to speak during the **ceremony**.

"I'll be very happy if I can shake his hand. That will be a wonderful lifetime experience," said Ponir, who lives with his wife and two children in a Buford Highway apartment.

It's unusual for a former or sitting president to **participate** in a **naturalization ceremony**, said Marian Smith, historian at the Immigration and **Naturalization** Service in Washington. The last recorded occasion was in 1976 when President Gerald Ford spoke at a **naturalization ceremony** at Thomas Jefferson's home in Monticello, near Charlottesville, Va., Smith said.

Carter's appearance is part of "Points of Entry," a series of exhibits, lectures and other activities on immigration hosted by several local institutions, including the **Carter** Center.

The citizens-to-be are so excited they've been trekking to the **Carter** Center to be sure they know how to get there and where to go for the **ceremony**, said **Carter** Center Director Don Schewe.

"We've probably had 50, at least, who have already come by. They are saying 'We don't want to miss this,' " Schewe said.

The Atlanta district INS office, which covers Georgia, Alabama, North Carolina and South Carolina, holds **naturalization ceremonies** every two weeks, usually in the Richard B. Russell Federal Building downtown.

Last year, 16,241 people became citizens in Atlanta. This year, the Atlanta INS office expects to **naturalize** 19,000 people, said Dwight Faulkner, assistant district director of the INS. Seventy percent of those who become citizens here live in the metro area, he said.

"Our numbers are skyrocketing," he said, adding that his office received 4,466 citizenship applications in January.

Welfare reform is one reason for the surge of applications, because legal immigrants now have to be citizens to qualify for food stamps and other benefits. The INS has also had to beef up FBI criminal background checks on each applicant, which is leading to a backlog of cases.

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In the past, people waited three to six months for their paperwork to be processed. Today, they have to wait about a year, Faulkner said.

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