

Officials Brace for Exodus Of Foreigners from Panama

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Body

Immigration **officials** say the arrest of 63 Chinese on an isolated Alabama airstrip last week was a sign that thousands of **foreigners** may soon try to enter the United States illegally from **Panama**.

The **officials** say the Chinese represent a painful legacy of the corruption rife in the regime of Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega and are among tens of thousands of **foreigners** in **Panama** who bought Panamanian passports, visas, residency permits and identity cards to escape their troubled homelands.

The **officials** said a large alien smuggling ring flourished under General Noriega. The aliens detained near Mobile were from mainland China and arrived by chartered aircraft from **Panama** in two groups on Saturday and Monday after paying up to \$15,000 each for illegal passage to the United States, the immigration **officials** said.

They were sent to immigration detention centers in Texas and Florida, where they face expulsion proceedings.

'Targeting the United States'

"We are aware that there are significant numbers of aliens in **Panama** that do not have legal residence there, and we're certainly sensitive to the possibility that they might be targeting the United States to arrive here illegally," said Duke Austin, a spokesman for the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

Estimates of the number of **foreigners** with uncertain legal status in **Panama** as a result of the ouster of General Noriega vary widely. Immigration **officials** in Washington estimated there are 7,000 Chinese and 2,000 Cubans in **Panama**. But some immigration **officials** and Panamanian government experts said there were up to 35,000 Chinese and 13,000 Cubans along with several thousand others, including Nicaraguans, Indians and Pakistanis.

The traffic in Panamanian immigration documents was sanctioned by the Noriega government, but was cut off after the United States invasion last December. The Government of President Guillermo Endara halted the sale of Panamanian documents overseas, and faced with daunting economic problems and high unemployment, it has grown increasingly reluctant to allow those in **Panama** to remain.

The arrival of Chinese in **Panama** increased dramatically last year with the Chinese Government's crackdown of the student democracy movement. Panamanian **officials** estimated that nearly 9,000 Chinese bought documents, most of them through the Panamanian consulate in Hong Kong, to enter **Panama**.

As Visas Expire, Desperation

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But now the temporary visas and residency permits, some issued for a year, are beginning to expire. Many **foreigners**, living in **Panama** in poverty, are willing to risk illegal entry to the United States following routes and using smuggling techniques used by drug traffickers.

The Chinese apprehended near Mobile, including some with \$1,000 bills sewn into their clothing, told investigators that they paid up to \$20,000 each for passports and visas to enter **Panama** and spent an additional \$15,000 to enter the United States, said Thomas P. Fischer, the immigration service regional director in Atlanta, whose jurisdiction includes Alabama.

He said they reported traveling a circuitous route from China to Hong Kong and then to London or Amsterdam before arriving in **Panama**. Most of those detained said they had left China two or three years ago.

Federal prosecutors in Mobile have charged Alfonso Mock-Castillo, a Panamanian restaurateur of Chinese ancestry, as the ringleader of the operation. They have accused him of arranging the flights through an undercover agent of the Customs Service. Mr. Mock-Castillo was arrested along with a woman, described by investigators as his accomplice, on charges of alien smuggling.

Suggestion of Noriega Role

Immigration **officials** suggested that Mr. Mock-Castillo had planned to transport up to 35,000 Chinese into the United States. Some of these **officials** suggested that the ring was part of an alien smuggling operation controlled by General Noriega and his associates.

But Dexter Lehtinen, the Federal prosecutor in Miami, who is prosecuting Gen. Noriega on drug trafficking charges, issued a statement denying that smuggling charges were likely. "There is no indictment currently planned or contemplated against General Manuel A. Noriega in this district that includes any allegations of alien smuggling."

Some immigration **officials** in Washington said they suspect that Federal prosecutors in Miami are wary of pursuing a case that would inevitably involve the politically volatile issue of Cuban immigration in South Florida, where Cuban-Americans form a powerful constituency. But immigration **officials** and prosecutors in Miami denied it.

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