

## **More Than 350 Held in Probe, Ashcroft Says**

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**Byline:** Mary Beth Sheridan and Brooke A. Masters, Washington Post Staff Writers

### **Body**

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**More** than **350** people have been swept up in the massive dragnet for witnesses and suspects cast since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, and nearly 400 others are still being sought for questioning, Attorney General John D. **Ashcroft said** yesterday.

None of the detainees has been charged with a crime directly related to the attacks, which left nearly 7,000 people missing or dead, Justice Department officials **said**. Instead, most are being **held** on immigration charges and traffic violations, and virtually none has been publicly identified.

Justice Department officials **say** that the large number of detentions reflects the breadth and complexity of the largest criminal investigation in U.S. history and continued uncertainty about how many people may have aided the 19 hijackers.

In revealing that law enforcement officers have taken into custody many **more** people than they had previously acknowledged, **Ashcroft said** that 98 are being **held** by the Immigration and Naturalization Service on alleged immigration violations, and many of the remaining 254 have been charged with traffic offenses, identification fraud or other minor crimes.

Beth Wilkinson, a former assistant U.S. attorney who prosecuted the Oklahoma City bombing case, called the FBI's tactics "a very aggressive posture to use, although not one that's illegal, assuming they're following all the strictures of the law and the provisions of the warrants.

"It's an extraordinary number of people [to detain], but this is an extraordinary crime and investigation," she **said**.

In the first arrest of someone charged with aiding the hijackers, an Arlington man was accused yesterday of helping five of the suspected attackers fraudulently obtain Virginia driver's licenses or identity cards.

Court documents released yesterday show that five alleged hijackers from three flights picked up those documents in Arlington on Aug. 2, just 40 days before the attacks.

In other developments yesterday:

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\* A government official confirmed that box-cutter knives similar to those used by the terrorists have been found aboard four planes that either took off or were grounded Sept. 11 as the hijackings were occurring. They include an American Airlines flight from San Diego that was kept on the ground when the attacks occurred and then taken for routine maintenance to Dallas, where the knives were found.

\* The FAA extended its latest ban on crop-dusting for a second day amid fears of biological or chemical attacks, and a Florida bank president said that one of the suspected terrorists may have sought a government loan to buy a crop-duster last year.

\* Dozens of undocumented immigrants working at U.S. airports, including Dulles International Airport, have been detained in recent days as authorities crack down on security.

An FBI affidavit filed in U.S. District Court in Alexandria revealed that on Aug. 2, a man identified as Herbert Villalobos and a confidential witness signed notarized forms falsely stating that two Arab men they had met a few minutes earlier were Virginia residents.

The notarized forms allowed the men to exploit a now-closed Virginia legal loophole and obtain valid licenses or identification cards even though they did not live in the state.

According to the affidavit, Villalobos identified five of the hijackers as having been at the Department of Motor Vehicles that day: Hani Hanjour, Salem Alhazmi and Majed Moqed, who were all aboard American Flight 77, which hit the Pentagon; Ahmed Alghamdi, who was on United 175, which struck the World Trade Center; and Abdulaziz Alomari on American Flight 11, which slammed into the New York landmark.

Sources and law enforcement documents indicate that two other Flight 77 hijackers, Khalid Al-Midhar and Nawaq Alhazmi, also obtained Virginia licenses about the same time.

Law enforcement sources said there is no evidence that either Villalobos, who is being held, or the witness had any advance knowledge of the attacks. Villalobos's attorney, Mike Lieberman, declined to comment.

New information also emerged yesterday about the discovery of box-cutters on other U.S. airliners after the terrorist attacks. The Washington Post has previously reported that the tools were found on two flights in addition to the ones hijacked, and that investigators were looking into the possibility that there were knives on two more.

Yesterday, an aviation source said a box-cutter was found on an American Airlines plane that had been scheduled to fly from San Diego to New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport at 8:20 a.m. Pacific time on Sept. 11 but did not leave when all flights were grounded after the attacks.

The instrument turned up Sept. 17, as mechanics at the airline's maintenance facility in Alliance, Tex., began an overhaul of the plane. As mechanics removed seat cushions, a dark gun-metal gray box-cutter knife fell to the floor, the source said. There is dispute about whether the knife was in the seat or taped to it, the source said.

Officials said it is unclear whether there is an innocent explanation for the five knives now known to have been found on four flights.

Officials said yesterday that tightened security has led to the detention of dozens of airport employees in Miami, Denver, Washington and other cities for lack of proper immigration papers. There was no indication that those detained were related to the terrorism investigation.

At Dulles, INS officials have detained at least four employees, according to Argenbright Security, the company that employs them.

One employee detained was a Lebanese immigrant working as a security guard, his lawyer said. The worker, Abdullah Salim Yassine, had an H-1B professional visa and was charged with switching employers without informing the INS, said Denyse Sabagh, the attorney.

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Sabagh **said** Yassine, 45, of Fairfax, was placed in deportation hearings and was being **held** without bond, an unusually strict measure. "I think this is probably happening to a lot of other people from Middle Eastern countries, and other countries on some list. They are detaining people even if they have nothing to do with what happened," she **said**.

A spokeswoman for the local INS office, Ernestine Fobbs, declined to comment.

The Dulles investigation and a similar one in Miami had been planned before the Sept. 11 attacks, according to the Department of Transportation's inspector general's office, which conducted the checks.

The Miami **probe** culminated with the arrest on Sept. 14 of a dozen undocumented immigrants from South America who worked at Miami International Airport.

Twenty-nine Mexicans working at Denver International Airport were detained Sept. 19 for using counterfeit identity documents and are being sent home, **said** Nina Pruneda-Muniz, a local INS spokeswoman. The workers' phony IDs were discovered when they applied for airport badges required under a new, stricter security system, airport spokesman Chuck Cannon **said**.

Also yesterday, a government official **said** Al-Badr Mohammed H. Al-Hazmi, a University of Texas radiologist who was arrested as a material witnesses, was expected to be released.

One chapter of the investigation into the hijackings ended yesterday, as the FBI concluded its search for wreckage from United Airlines Flight 93, which slammed into a field in Pennsylvania. Investigators **said** they found no evidence of an explosion -- a possibility raised after a passenger told his mother by phone that the hijackers claimed to have a bomb.

Staff writers Dan Eggen, Don Phillips and Susan Schmidt contributed to this report.

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