

'Numerous' arrests ahead for Chinese stowaways

The Atlanta Journal and Constitution
August 17, 1999, Tuesday,, Home Edition

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Section: Local News; Pg. 6B

Length: 433 words

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Body

Authorities say they plan to make **arrests** today in the case of 132 **Chinese** nationals found hidden in a ship in Savannah last week.

Thomas Fischer, district director of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, said agents will make **arrests** after consulting the U.S. attorney. Agents will continue interviewing the **stowaways** and 28 crew members of the Prince Nicolas, a 40,000-ton ship from Cyprus.
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INS agents found the illegal immigrants in a secret compartment of the ship Thursday. Agents took the **stowaways** and crew members to jails in DeKalb and Fulton counties Friday and have been interviewing them since. They plan more interviews for today and the rest of the week. They said Monday they do not know the **stowaways'** destination.

The INS said it plans to deport the illegal immigrants, but at least 45 have asked for asylum, said Sue Brown, an agency spokeswoman. She said an asylum officer will interview applicants and make a recommendation to an immigration judge. The government generally grants asylum to people in fear of injury or persecution in their home country.

"If people do claim asylum, then we have a duty to look at this very carefully," Brown said.

Fischer said he expects "**numerous** **arrests** today.

Several smuggling operations uncovered by federal authorities recently have sent ship crew members to prison.

In June, a federal jury in San Diego convicted four members of a ship's crew of several illegal immigrant-smuggling charges. A judge is to sentence them in October. The ship's captain pleaded guilty and got an 18-month sentence. Jurors could not reach verdicts in the case of three other crew members. In that case, prosecutors say smugglers kept 150 **Chinese** in inhumane and unsanitary conditions on a fishing boat.

The 150 **Chinese** were from Fujian Province, a region of 30 million people on the coast of southeastern China. Many of the 132 **Chinese** found in Savannah also are from that province, Fischer said.

In May 1998, a small boat came ashore in New Jersey with 25 **Chinese** aboard. They told investigators they had come from China on a larger ship a few miles away. Investigators sailed to the larger ship and **arrested** the ship's captain and engineer. The captain was sentenced to three years and 10 months in prison. The engineer was sentenced to three years and one month behind bars.

Fischer also said Monday that only 20 of the 132 **Chinese** were ages 14-17. Agents initially said that 51 of the 132 were ages 14-17, but Fischer said interviewers have concluded that some of the illegal immigrants claimed to be younger than they are.

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Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Subject: IMMIGRATION (93%); ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS (92%); POLITICAL ASYLUM (91%); INTERVIEWS (90%); SMUGGLING (90%); **ARRESTS** (90%); SENTENCING (89%); CORRECTIONS (89%); JUDGES (89%); LITIGATION (89%); JAIL SENTENCING (89%); JURY TRIALS (88%); DECISIONS & RULINGS (88%); CITIZENSHIP (78%); CRIMINAL CONVICTIONS (78%); PUBLIC PROSECUTORS (78%); SPECIAL INVESTIGATIVE FORCES (78%); DEPORTATION (77%); US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (77%); IMMIGRATION LAW (77%); ALIEN SMUGGLING (77%); FEDERAL INVESTIGATIONS (77%); GUILTY PLEAS (72%); VERDICTS (72%); INVESTIGATIONS (60%)

Company: IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (91%); IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (84%)

Organization: IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (91%); IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (84%)

Industry: MARINE VESSELS (78%)

Geographic: FUJIAN, CHINA (79%); NEW JERSEY, USA (79%); CALIFORNIA, USA (79%); SOUTH CHINA (79%); CHINA (94%)

Load-Date: August 17, 1999

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