

INS getting cagey in cat-and-mouse game / Visa tightens at the source -- airports overseas

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Body

Each year thousands of undocumented foreigners, bearing little more than desperate pleas for asylum, flood John F. Kennedy International **Airport** - a main entry point for illegal immigrants.

Illegal immigrants claiming asylum rose 900%, to 9,178, between 1990 and 1992. But on this day, the glass-enclosed room used for questioning undocumented asylum seekers stands empty - a welcome and increasingly common occurrence, officials say.

The number of illegal immigrants - mostly Chinese, Indians and Pakistanis - arriving at JFK has dropped 45% since February.

The suspected reason: a year-long collaboration among the Immigration and Naturalization Service, U.S. consulates **overseas** and airlines - badly hit by INS fines - that has intensified scrutiny of passengers at key **airports** abroad.

But there are signs the problem hasn't gone away - merely moved somewhere else. While JFK's numbers are down, nationwide the total number of arrivals seeking asylum remains high. INS officials say organized crime has shifted its sights to other cities, like Miami, San Juan and San Francisco.

"Right now, they're shopping" for the weakest links in the system, says Marie Schroeder, assistant chief INS inspector.

Still, the agency is encouraged by the results here. "We hope we're discouraging a trend," says Schroeder, who heads the INS Carrier Consultant Project.

This month, 30 INS agents fan out around the world to train airline agents to spot fraudulent documents, counterfeit tickets, and "document flushers" who will try to gain entry into the USA by claiming asylum.

When the program started last year, Tokyo's Narita International **Airport** was the most frequent point of origin of inadmissible passengers arriving in the USA. But following INS training of hundreds of airline agents there, Narita isn't even in the top 10 this year.

Charles Akalski, INS assistant port director at JFK, is pleased with the decline, but cautious. Far too many immigrants still arrive without documents, claim asylum and - because there isn't enough space to detain them - are released into the nation's largest city without the INS having any real idea of who they are or why they came.

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"To have 300 or 400 people a month still walking out the door - is that acceptable?" Akalski asks. "They could be terrorists."

Revelations that several suspects in the World Trade Center bombing evaded U.S. immigration laws has prompted new proposals to fight illegal immigration, including a \$ 172 million plan by President Clinton.

One World Trade Center suspect, Ramzi Yousef, sought asylum when he arrived at JFK last year, then disappeared while his case was pending.

The INS has space to hold only 100 at a privately run jail in Queens, at an annual cost of \$ 5 million. Virtually everyone who arrives here without proper entry documents, such as a visa, is allowed into the country after being detained briefly and given an immigration hearing date - three months later.

"We've had cases where people tried to run out," Akalski says. "We tackle them, bring them back and say, 'You can't run out of here. First, you need these documents. Then you can walk out.' "

Most of the illegals board planes using fraudulent documents, which they destroy en route, immigration officials say.

Los Angeles International Airport saw an explosion of cases in 1990. But the number of illegal immigrants arriving there fell from 1,000 a month to 250 shortly after a new INS detention center opened in 1991.

Almost immediately, JFK got hit. During the 1992 federal fiscal year, 14,866 immigrants without proper papers arrived.

Airlines, fined \$ 3,000 for each passenger without proper papers, then got serious, says Akalski: "Cost is the key."

After Air France was fined \$ 300,000 in October 1992, it asked the INS for help.

Investigators discovered that unmonitored lounges at international airports were being used to sneak undocumented aliens on flights to the United States without scrutiny of documents. On the INS' recommendation, the airline began inspecting documents immediately before boarding. It also began turning suspects over to French authorities.

Last month, Air France had no fines for undocumented asylum seekers.

"The airlines realized that if they don't become hard targets, their profits would be a minus," says James Carlin, security manager for Air France. Besides, "you don't want people that desperate on an aircraft."

To avoid detection, smugglers often route illegals through several cities. Asian organized crime now favors smuggling passengers, many destined to lives of indentured servitude in the USA, through Latin America and the Caribbean.

The costly cat-and-mouse game is far from over, says American Airline's Jim Holden, head of a group of 17 domestic and foreign carriers sharing methods and information: "The Chinese are still nailing us to the wall. We're spending millions of dollars, but we're pledged to stop this."

Asylum claims down at JFK airport The number of immigrants entering the USA by claiming asylum at New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport has dropped this year.

Number entering by month:

July '92 780
June '93 484

Most violations at JFK Airlines are fined \$ 3,000 for each improperly documented passenger they fly to the USA. Those fines may be cancelled on appeal. Most violations and fines occur at JFK airport. Monthly violations and air carrier fines at all U.S. airports compared to JFK:

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Improper documentation violations

JFK All

airport airports

June '93 119 (1) 248 (1)

(1) - June totals are likely to lower as cases are adjudicated.

Improper documentation fines (2)

JFK All

airport airports

May '93 \$ 87,000 \$ 102,000

(2) - June fines were not available.

Most-fined carriers at JFK

Air France	\$ 912,000
British Airways	\$ 462,000
Lufthansa	\$ 297,000
Pakistan International	\$ 291,000
Aeroflot	\$ 258,000
Alitalia	\$ 225,000
Nigeria Airways	\$ 222,000
Iberia Airlines	\$ 216,000
Japan Airlines	\$ 213,000
KLM Royal Dutch	\$ 198,000

Notes

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Graphic

GRAPHIC, b/w, Elys E. McLean, USA TODAY, Source: Immigration and Naturalization Service (Line graph, bar graph); PHOTO, b/w, Bob Strong

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