

IMMIGRATION IN THE TWIN CITIES AFTER 9/11: For some, registration leads to deportation

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Body

A new nationwide tracking system is causing turmoil for Middle Eastern visitors in the Twin Cities, some of whom face the threat of being deported when they register.

The difficulties come as men 16 and older report to the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service office in Bloomington, where they are interviewed, fingerprinted and photographed.

Some foreign visitors who have gone to register have had removal proceedings started against them if they have past or current problems with their immigration status, attorneys say. Federal officials appear to be unable or unwilling to exercise discretion in those cases, even when the visitors have pending applications for permanent residency, signified by so-called green cards.

The INS has detained people for hours, sometimes in handcuffs, attorneys say, adding that some of the detainees feared being immediately deported.

Outside the Bloomington INS office Friday, a Lebanese native who is studying medicine at the University of Minnesota said he understood the need for heightened security. But he questioned how effective the new tracking system would be.

"We work hard to come here. We don't want to be treated like terrorists," said the student, who didn't want to be identified because he said he feared reprisals. "We come here to get good training and work hard to contribute to the economy of this country, not to be treated as criminals."

"The goal of finding people who might have devious plans is one thing," said immigration attorney Leslie Guyton, whose St. Paul office had three clients, from Syria, Libya and Sudan, detained for a day when they went to register. "What is going to happen is very innocent people are going to be caught up in this, people who have been law-abiding good people who may be in the process of straightening out their papers. I think it's very harsh."

The screening system was launched in response to 9/11, in part to help authorities track wanted criminals and terrorists. For now, men from 18 Middle Eastern and Arab nations must register. In three years, it will grow to track all of the estimated 35 million foreign visitors who enter the United States each year. Most are students, business travelers or tourists visiting relatives.

Temporary foreign visitors from Iran, Iraq, Libya, Sudan or Syria who were admitted before Sept. 10 must register by today. Those from Afghanistan, Algeria, Bahrain, Eritrea, Lebanon, Morocco, North Korea, Oman, Qatar, Somalia, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates who entered before Oct. 1 and who will stay at least until Jan. 10 must register by that day.

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INS officials have said the agency is carrying out a mandate from Congress to screen temporary foreign visitors more closely. Those who have problems with their immigration status are subject to removal proceedings and, under security procedures, may be placed in holding cells and handcuffed, though usually only briefly, said INS spokesman Tim Counts.

The INS is not releasing the number of those who register or those who end up in removal proceedings as a result.

May Jasem, a U student from Qatar who accompanied her husband, Ibrahim Ali, to translate while he registered, said officials were polite.

"With what happened on Sept. 11, they should take care," Jasem said. "This bothers me because we're students -- we came just to study."

Minnetonka immigration attorneys Steven Thal and Barbara Erlandson said a client of theirs from Iran was referred to deportation when officials found he had had problems with his immigration status, though he is only months away from becoming a permanent resident.

"If they didn't have special registration ... these individuals would not have been under removal proceedings," Thal said. "They would have allowed the process to continue. It's very unusual for a case like that to be placed in removal proceedings."

The tracking system also will complicate life for businesspeople here on temporary visas who often travel out of the country, said Minneapolis immigration attorney Scott Wright. They must check with the INS whenever they leave the country or return, and they must do so where they depart or re-enter.

As the tracking system expands to cover trading partners in North America, Europe and Asia, the United States could face a backlash, Wright said.

"We need to make sure hundreds of thousands of Americans living, working and studying abroad are not punished for the United States' being overzealous on technicalities here," Wright said. "We need to make sure that people with minor technical violations who have made a mistake, that shouldn't cost them their livelihood."

To learn more about the new regulations, check:

* INS Service Center: (800) 375-5283.

* INS on the Web: www.ins.usdoj.gov

* University of Minnesota students: www.isss.umn.edu

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