

Legal Tangle Puts 24 Malaysians in Boston Jails

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Body

They came as tourists, but they ended up in **jail**. Twenty-four **Malaysians** in the middle of a world tour have been detained for 11 days here in a painful and perplexing **legal tangle**, held as witnesses while the Federal Government prosecutes their tour leader on charges of trying to smuggle two of them into the country.

Malaysian Government officials and lawyers for the tourists -- 18 men and 6 women -- have expressed outrage at the detentions. They say a number of the tourists have been threatened by agents for the Immigration and Naturalization Service and kept from speaking to Malaysian consular officials.

The detentions are being defended by American officials. All the tourists are ethnic Chinese, and in recent years the Government has been concerned by an influx of illegal Chinese immigrants.

Verne Jarvis, the chief spokesman for the immigration service, said on Saturday that Federal law allowed the authorities to detain material witnesses in an immigration case indefinitely.

In an interview in The **Boston** Globe today, A. John Pappalardo, the United States Attorney in **Boston**, was quoted as saying, "I have reviewed this case, and I am entirely comfortable with the current posture of it." He did not return calls to his office today.

'If They Were White . . .'

But Charles W. Rankin, a court-appointed lawyer for one tourist, said the **Malaysians** had been "treated in a racist manner" by the immigration service. "If they were white Europeans, they would have been released immediately," he said.

Michael Altman, a lawyer for Chee Kheong Choong, the 39-year-old tour leader, said, "If this happened to a group of 25 Americans in Malaysia, there would probably be a plan to send in the Marines."

Lawyers for the witnesses said their clients had not even had **legal** representation for eight days, until they were brought into court and lawyers were appointed for them.

The incident began Oct. 21, when the group arrived in **Boston** on a flight from Paris. It was their first stop on the American leg of a \$2,400 eight-city tour that was to have ended this week with a visit to Washington.

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According to Mr. Altman, an immigration inspector noticed that one of the tourists had been in the United States before and might have overstayed her six-month tourist visa. The inspector then decided to question the entire group, holding the visitors in a jail in the Coast Guard station in Boston, Mr. Altman said. They are now being held in county jails.

Handcuffs in the Courtroom

The Government has asked that seven members of the tour group be held as witnesses against Mr. Choong, an employee of Chan Brothers, a travel agency in Kuala Lumpur. Mr. Altman has asked in United States District Court here that the other members of the group be held so he can question them.

He told Magistrate-Judge Marianne B. Bowler on Friday that he had no objection to their being released from jail, since the Immigration Service has confiscated their passports. But late Friday afternoon Judge Bowler ordered that all 24 be held over the weekend, pending a further hearing on Tuesday.

At a hearing before Judge Bowler on Thursday, the tourists were brought into the courtroom in plastic handcuffs, their lawyers said. Asked to take an oath, they were unable to raise their right hands, and although it was hot in the courtroom, the marshals refused to cut off the handcuffs so they could take off their overcoats.

Several immigration lawyers said today that when the immigration services suspects that a visa has been overstayed, it normally simply deports the visitor. But in this case, immigration agents questioned the tourists and Mr. Choong.

Tourists Who Stayed

Two of the women, Lee Ling Ng and Chee Men Lee, told the agents they had been in the country before and had stayed several years beyond the six-month limit, according to testimony by an immigration service agent, Kevin Jarvis. He said Miss Ng and Miss Lee told Mr. Choong they wanted to stay in the United States to work.

Lawyers say the detained tourists, who include a pregnant woman and a couple on their honeymoon, all have valid visas.

The Malaysian Ambassador, Abdul Majid, said in a telephone interview from Washington that his only information about the case had come from reporters. He called the incident "quite serious" but added that he would not take any further action until he knew more about it.

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