

Arrests target illegal workers, some in Phila.

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Body

FBI and immigration agents have **arrested** dozens of foreign **workers**, most of them Pakistani nationals, at shopping malls in many cities, including **Philadelphia**.

Officials said the **arrests**, which began Wednesday, were meant to **target illegal** foreign **workers**, although there was no immediate explanation why the FBI was involved.

"The only thing I can say is INS and FBI are working on a joint investigation," Immigration and Naturalization Service spokeswoman Niki Edwards said yesterday. She declined to answer all other questions.

The Embassy of Pakistan sent a formal request for more information yesterday to the U.S. Department of Justice, along with an expression of concern about the **arrests**, said Asad Hayauddin, the embassy press attache. (The Justice Department oversees the INS and FBI.)

"Anybody who has a Pakistani passport in this country is of interest to us," Hayauddin said. "We have no idea how many people were **arrested**. We've asked for information about the basis for these **arrests**."

Initial reports yesterday said the operation was conducted in **Philadelphia**, Pittsburgh and Atlanta. Subsequent reports said sweeps also occurred in Alabama, Georgia, North Carolina and South Carolina. Although federal officials have said the number of people placed in custody is several dozen, it was unclear yesterday how many of them were from the **Philadelphia** area.

Hayauddin said Pakistani callers from various cities reported **arrests** "all along the East Coast," but he said the embassy had no formal verification.

Security officials at several malls in the **Philadelphia** region declined to comment.

Brian Sierra, spokesman for the Justice Department, told the Atlanta Constitution yesterday that the operation began Wednesday.

He said federal agents were "looking at **illegal** immigrants working at kiosks" but gave no other information.

Victor Gill, a **Philadelphia**-area advocate for Pakistani Christian immigrants, said he had little information as of yesterday, but he added that immigrant **workers** were coveted in such jobs.

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"Usually, it's cheaper to hire illegal immigrants because you are just paying them \$200 a week," Gill said. "On one hand, [employers] are helping the new immigrants. On the other, they're trying to use them."

In the first months after Sept. 11, an estimated 300 Pakistani nationals - among hundreds of Middle Eastern and South Asian immigrants - were arrested and held in a search for terrorists or witnesses.

None were charged with a terrorist crime. After pressure from the Pakistani Embassy, the United States began releasing most of the Pakistanis for voluntary deportation for visa violations.

Hayauddin said most Pakistanis now have left, including 132 people who were flown home en masse Wednesday from Louisiana, leaving about 50 still in detention.

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