

Congress flooding INS with queries

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Body

When I talked to him the other day, I could tell Allen Erenbaum was gulping down a mouthful of lunch at the same time he was trying to answer my questions.

Erenbaum, director of congressional relations for the Immigration and Naturalization Service, has been a busy man of late. Since it passed the 1996 Immigration Reform Act, Congress has been swamped with complaints about the law - and members in turn are peppering Erenbaum's staff with questions and requests for assistance.

In 1992, there were 28,550 congressional inquiries; last year, the figure soared to 46,500.
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"The new law eliminated several forms of relief," Erenbaum notes. "Individuals who in the past might have gotten that relief are no longer eligible for it and are turning to members of Congress for help."

Spooked by the World Trade Center bombing and terrorist threats, Congress has made it harder for foreign nationals to enter the country and easier to kick out those who are here. Foreigners who run afoul of the law are hit with a double whammy: harsh penalties and almost no way to appeal them.

If, for example, you stay longer than your visa allows, you can be barred from re-entering for up to 10 years.

If you're suspected of trying to enter the country through fraud or misrepresentation, you can be banned for five years without access to a lawyer or a hearing - a process called "expedited removal."

And if you're a permanent legal resident who has been convicted of an aggravated felony - even if the crime occurred long before the act took effect - you can be banished for 20 years.

Expedited removal has caused the biggest hue and cry, especially among civil libertarians who consider it a denial of due process. But it has generated relatively few congressional inquiries - unless those who are removed get someone in the United States to take up their cause, no one is going to hear from them for at least five years.

On the other hand, Erenbaum gets many complaints about the crime-related provisions of the 1996 law because deportation often means the breakup of immigrant families.

Don't bother arguing that you've cleaned up your act or have strong ties to the community or that your kids need you for support - "the standards have been toughened and people who have committed crimes in the past are no longer eligible for relief," Erenbaum says.

Sometimes, a plea to a member of Congress can help. In the past two weeks I've written a lot about a Treasure Island couple who faced a 10-year banishment from the United States because of a paperwork mix-up. The wife, a

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citizen of India, got at least a month's reprieve, thanks in part to extensive publicity and the involvement of U.S. Rep. C.W. Bill Young.

At other times, a foreigner's appeal to a U.S. lawmaker can backfire, especially if it appears the person has started to act like a U.S. citizen without ever having gone through the complex naturalization process.

U.S. consulates overseas, which have the power to grant or deny visas, might find it "particularly galling that a (foreigner) who is not a voter and who is essentially a guest on a temporary basis would challenge their decision by bringing it up to an elected congressman," says Ramon Carrion, a Clearwater immigration lawyer.

At the very time the press and public have more and more questions about our immigration laws, Congress is cutting back on the number of INS employees who can supply the answers. Over the past three years, the agency's public affairs and congressional relations staff has dwindled from a total of 60 to just 43.

Still, mindful of who controls the purse strings, Erenbaum's office tries to answer all inquiries from Capitol Hill within 30 days. "We're not there yet," he says, "but we're really focusing on doing it because we know how critical it is to be responsive."

UPDATE: King Hussein of Jordan does have lymphoma, but told his countrymen and women Tuesday night that it is a highly treatable form of cancer that should allow full recovery.

In a message televised from his suite at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn., a cheerful-looking king said his general condition was "excellent and the mind is clear and the morale high."

Hussein, 62, will require six chemotherapy treatments, each three weeks long, but said he hopes to return soon to Amman.

The king, who has had several serious medical problems since 1992, has been unusually open about his cancer, which is still considered a taboo topic in his conservative country. His health is of great concern not just to Jordanians, whom he has ruled for 45 years, but to the United States and Israel, which have long regarded him as one of the most influential and enlightened leaders in the Middle East.

In a portent of what might happen in the event of the king's death or prolonged incapacitation, Syria has started to verbally attack Jordan for its ties with Israel, the Tel Aviv daily Ha'aretz reports.

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