

U.S. immigration policy to undergo scrutiny;

Tales of the terrorist hijackers' comings and goings have raised concerns.

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Body

Ethan Mith has miserable timing. Twenty years ago, he was born in the middle of his parents' escape from Cambodia. Yesterday, he became a U.S. citizen in the middle of what may become new concern about foreigners.

"It's sad," Mith said after taking the oath of citizenship in Philadelphia on National Constitution Day along with 47 others. "There were [immigrants] working as terrorists and they're scaring everybody. But it's not all immigrants' fault."

As information emerges about the way hijackers entered and lived in the country, the 30 million foreign-born residents in the United States - 11 percent of the population - may find themselves the subjects of renewed questions about immigration policy.

Immigration-reform groups, for example, used the tragedy to renew calls for stricter border controls.

Attorney General John Ashcroft reportedly is considering asking Congress to amend immigration laws as part of its antiterrorism package, though the details are unclear.

And even supporters of legal immigration expressed concern about the issue. After welcoming the new citizens at the Philadelphia ceremony yesterday, Sen. Arlen Specter said stricter controls may be needed to crack down on terror cells.

"There's going to be a substantial reevaluating of immigration [laws]," Specter told reporters after the ceremony. "I would not cut down on legal immigration. But I would tighten up [controls] to keep out people who we have reason to believe may be terrorists."

Among other things, immigration critics and advocates agreed the INS, FBI and other agencies must link their databases and enable border officials to check them for suspected terrorists at airports in the United States, Mexico and Canada - the latter sometimes an entry point for alleged terrorists.

Records show that one of the hijackers, Mohammad Atta, first entered the country in May 2000 on a six-month visa and stayed 30 days longer than allowed. Atta, who was from the United Arab Emirates, left the country and then

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reentered this year, obtaining a six-month extension even though his old visa had expired, according to Immigration and Naturalization Service records reviewed by the Los Angeles Times.

He left and reentered at least one more time before allegedly taking part in the attacks, records show.

It is unclear what kind of visa Atta was using, or why border officials extended his initial visa, which typically would warrant scrutiny.

"Once all the smoke clears, these immigrant issues are going to have to be addressed," said Dan Stein, director of the Washington-based Federation for American Immigration Reform. "We have met the enemy, and they are here."

Another group, New York-based Project USA, distributed an e-mail yesterday that it said was from a victim of the attack. The note said, in part: "If these people were not allowed into my country unchecked, the [World Trade Center] would still be standing, and many of my co-workers and friends would be alive. We must close the borders now, and have all illegal aliens deported."

However, Kathleen Newland, codirector of the Migration Policy Institute, a Washington-based think tank affiliated with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, said a general crackdown on all immigrants would be impossible and misplaced.

She noted that the INS every year issues 26 million to 28 million visas, the majority limited-duration tourist visas. "Clearly these adversaries are very adept at exploiting whatever the weakest link is in that array of possibilities," Newland said. "But unless we are going to cut down on everything, particularly tourism, it's really misguided to look at immigration policy. . . . It's a national security issue, an intelligence issue. The use of immigration policy to address this kind of threat is a very blunt instrument."

Angela Kelley, deputy director of the National Immigration Forum, an advocacy group based in Washington, said calls for a broad crackdown come from "a vocal minority."

"I expect there to be caution and thoughtfulness as we move forward to make sure this doesn't happen again," Kelley said. "But it would be such a victory for the terrorists if we [behaved as] anything but a proud nation of immigrants."

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Graphic

PHOTO;

ERIC MENCHER, Inquirer Staff Photographer

Among those at yesterday's Philadelphia ceremony for new citizens were (from left) Min-Jung Eun from South Korea; Trung Dinh, Vietnam; and Alex Skavronsky, Ukraine. Sen. Arlen Specter addressed the group and later promised a law review.

ERIC MENCHER, Inquirer Staff Photographer

Jackie Aboush, from Israel, signs a copy of the Constitution after becoming a U.S. citizen during a Philadelphia ceremony. Watching is Francis Lebrigand.

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