

NS Signup Deadline Draws Mideast men, Skepticism

By Tom Bailey Jr.

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By lunch Friday, about 20 men who appeared to be of Middle Eastern descent sat in the second-floor waiting room of the Immigration and Naturalization Service office on Sycamore View.

Each waited his turn to be called into a room and questioned, fingerprinted and photographed for a special registration program that the INS says is designed to ensure the nation's security.

Memphis immigration attorney Barry L. Frager called it a waste of INS resources.

"You're drawing out convenience store owners, gas station owners," Frager said as he scanned the waiting room.

"I assure you, not one terrorist has come to register."

Friday was the registration deadline for any male visa-holder - foreign visitors such as tourists, students and temporary workers - from 13 countries identified by the U.S. government as havens for terrorists: Afghanistan, Algeria, Bahrain, Eritrea, Lebanon, Morocco, North Korea, Oman, Qatar, Somalia, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates and Yemen.

Their registration, which started Dec. 2, was the second wave of the special INS program. The first, for men from Iran, Iraq, Libya, Sudan and Syria, was Nov. 15 to Dec. 16.

An estimated 14,000 Saudis and Pakistanis nationwide must appear in INS offices by Feb. 21.

The number of people registering at the INS Memphis office, which serves Tennessee, was unavailable, said Sarah Mouw, community relations officer for the INS regional office in New Orleans.

The purpose of the program, she said, "is to help ensure our nation's security." It provides closer monitoring of foreign visitors, she said.

Nashville immigration attorney Phil Cargile emerged with his Yemeni client, a Nashville restaurant cook who would give only his first name, Kamal.

"How long did it take?" another immigration attorney, John S. Richbourg, asked Cargile. Richbourg had been waiting with his client.

"Did they want to talk to him without you being present?" Richbourg asked.

Yes, initially INS personnel appeared to want to question Kamal without Cargile, but did not object when Cargile intervened, Cargile said.

"They're just trying to do things fast," Cargile said.

The INS asked Kamal about his background, his contacts in the United States, his finances and bank account, Cargile said.

Kamal's registration apparently went smoothly. "We did well today," Cargile said.

But others, mainly those who have overstayed their visas, were detained and may face deportation.

Nationally, more than 500 men have been detained. The number of men detained locally was not available.

Fragar represented five men in the waiting room, and by day's end two of them were in the West Tennessee Detention Center at Mason under \$7,500 cash bonds. All five had overstayed their visas, but the three not detained were married to U.S. citizens and were in the process of obtaining permanent residency, or green cards, Frager said.

One of Frager's clients is Mohammed Al-Outrani, 28, a Yemeni citizen who has been in the United States seven years. Al-Outrani, owner of McLemore Market at 1503 E. McLemore, two months ago married U.S. citizen Jacqueline Barnes, who is trying to sponsor him for permanent residency. Problem is, a similar petition by his now ex-wife in New York has not been withdrawn. As a result, the INS won't accept the new petition, Frager said.

Still, Al-Outrani was one of the ones walking away Friday a free man.

"I know I have done nothing wrong," he said. "Seven years (in the U.S.), and I don't even have a speeding ticket."

Word has spread in the immigrant community of hard-working people being jailed after registering, Al-Outrani said, adding that many others have chosen not to report.

But Frager said he tells his clients it's important for them to follow the laws of a country that is doing them the favor of allowing them to live in it.

Richbourg said the local INS has handled the special registration "very professionally."

Cargile also said he and his clients have not experienced many problems.

But the American Civil Liberties Union said Friday the program has resulted in hundreds of unwarranted detentions. The ACLU seeks a full congressional investigation into the INS program, and urges all affected noncitizens to seek legal counsel.

Dalia Hashad, the ACLU's Arab, Muslim and South Asian advocate, said, "Not only does it undercut basic American conceptions of law and basic decency, it reduces security by alienating the very communities whose cooperation is essential in the fight against terrorism."

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