

MUSLIM IMMIGRANTS MUST REPORT

by JACK CHANG, Contra Costa Times
November 4, 2003

Tens of thousands of male visitors from 24 Muslim countries and North Korea must report to federal authorities over the next six months or risk deportation for falling out of legal immigration status.

The rule applies to visitors who complied with a controversial registration program last year that required predominantly Muslim visitors to report to immigration offices for fingerprinting, photographing and questioning.

That program required those visitors to re-register every year within 10 days of the anniversary of their registration date.

The new round of registrations begins Wednesday with male visitors from five countries -- Iran, Iraq, Libya, Sudan and Syria -- who registered last year from Nov. 15 to Dec. 16.

In all, nearly 84,000 men over age 16 registered in the last round of registrations, which ran from Nov. 2002 until April 2003.

U.S. citizens and permanent residents were not required to register.

Immigrant and civil rights advocates said this week the Department of Homeland Security, which oversees immigration matters, has failed to publicize the coming deadlines or even send letters to registrants reminding them to re-register.

"Under these circumstances, the government can and should publicize the fact that people who registered last year should go in this year, too," said Lucas Guttentag, Oakland-based director of the Immigrants' Rights Project of the American Civil Liberties Union.

"It certainly raises a question whether this government is interested in collecting information or is simply setting traps for these individuals."

Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services spokeswoman Sharon Rummery said her office handed re-registration reminders to people when they first registered.

Immigration offices have not sent reminders to registrants closer to their re-register deadline dates, Rummery said.

Government officials have said the registration program would bolster national security by catching people seeking to attack Americans and would eventually affect visitors from all countries.

Since concluding in April, however, the program has not expanded to non-Muslim countries.

The government plans to launch a program next year requiring customs officials photograph and fingerprint every visitor entering the country.

Concord resident Khalid Turk, who registered last year as a Pakistani guest worker, said he had forgotten about the re-registration requirement -- although he remembered being told about it when he registered in January.

"I think there'll be a mess again for a while," Turk said. "It would be really much better if they just sent a letter and reminded people."

Tens of thousands of people were detained during the last registration period, with 13,780 placed in deportation proceedings for falling out of legal immigration status.

Immigrant groups said many people were persecuted for minor visa violations.