



Authorities allege immigration fraud

Say ring based in N.Va. helped many get bogus passports, ID documents

BY PAUL BRADLEY

TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER

Tuesday, November 23, 2004

ALEXANDRIA - Law-enforcement authorities said yesterday that they have broken up a massive immigration-fraud network that stretched across the nation from its Northern Virginia hub.

U.S. Attorney Paul J. McNulty said a two-year investigation dubbed Operation Jakarta has resulted in fraud and conspiracy charges against 26 people associated with four Indonesian immigration brokerages, which authorities charge aggressively practiced immigration and identification fraud.

Authorities allege that since 1999, the brokers helped thousands of immigrants win political-asylum petitions and obtain bogus passports, Social Security cards, permanent residency cards and Virginia driver's licenses and identification cards.

In the process, authorities said, the brokers earned millions of dollars from clients who paid between \$2,000 and \$4,000 for their services.

"It was one-stop shopping for immigration fraud," said Marcy Foreman, director of investigations for the U.S. Immigration and Customs enforcement agency.

Though investigators found no ties to terrorism, McNulty said the scams uncovered by a multi-agency task force closely resembled those used by the 9/11 hijackers in obtaining fraudulent immigration and identification documents.

"It reached into virtually every kind of identification system we have in this country," he said. "We are all aware that terrorists exploit document fraud as they try to integrate themselves into our communities."

Authorities said 16 of those charged were arrested yesterday, while the rest are being sought.

Police also conducted raids on the four brokers: the Chinese Indonesian American Society, of Fairfax Station; Asian-American American Placement Services, of Springfield; Kumala Nusantara, of Burke; and Chinese Indonesian Pribumi Community Service of Manassas.

Of the 26 defendants, 23 are Indonesian citizens, two are U.S. citizens and one is Australian of Indonesian descent, authorities said. Of the Indonesian citizens, three are lawful permanent residents, 15 have been granted political asylum and five are illegal immigrants, authorities said.

According to court papers, the brokerage firms advertised their services in the Indonesian Journal and Indonesian Media, two magazines published in California and aimed at Indonesian readers. The advertisements said the firms could help clients to get a broad array of government documents and services.

Their clients came from as far away as Hawaii and involved immigrants from 18 other states. Court papers said the brokers filed more than 1,000 bogus claims for asylum and 170 false labor certification claims, and helped nearly 1,900 people obtain Virginia driver's licenses or identification cards by fraud.

Ralph Gay, head of enforcement for the Virginia Department of Motor Vehicles, said DMV is in the process of finding those with bogus licenses and revoking them. In late 2001, DMV stopped using the residency and identification certifications, which were abused by the brokers, Gay said.

McNulty said brokers took advantage of laws granting political asylum to immigrants fleeing persecution in their home country. Brokers tapped into the perceived sympathies of asylum officers and immigration judges, claiming that applicants had been raped, sexually assaulted, beaten or robbed by Muslims because of their ethnicity or their Christian beliefs, McNulty said.

Investigators found, however, that the applications were filled out in boilerplate fashion. Fourteen applications, for example, used almost word-for-word language claiming clients were raped by taxi drivers, court papers said. Eleven of those asylum applications were approved.

Applications also included fabricated birth certificates, baptismal certificates and police reports, court papers said.

In addition, clients were heavily coached before interviews with asylum officers and immigration judges. Some applicants were provided copies of the Ten Commandments and instructed to memorize them to buttress their asylum claims.

"The defendants counseled married immigrants to feature the wife as the lead applicant because the defendants believed immigration judges were more sympathetic to women," McNulty said. "Applicants were told to cry, plead and avoid positive references to Indonesia. The defendants also supplied their clients with interpreters who would enhance the testimony clients gave."

"These people were coached very well," he said.

The scam was extremely lucrative, McNulty said.

"The defendants made millions of dollars in profits from their crimes," he said. "They lived in extravagant neighborhoods. They drove expensive cars."

He added that the case was cracked with the assistance of several immigrants who contacted law enforcement after learning of the brokers' practices.

Some of them were enlisted as informants, posing as customers as the investigation continued, he said.

Since the Sept. 11 attacks, McNulty's office, working with other federal agencies, has mounted a concerted effort to thwart immigration and identification fraud.

"We have to be very aggressive about this kind of fraud," he said. "We have to maintain the integrity of the system."

Contact Paul Bradley at (703) 548-8758 or pbradley@timesdispatch.com

This story can be found at: http://www.timesdispatch.com/servlet/Satellite?pagename=RTD%2FMGArticle%2FRTD_BasicArticle&c=MGArticle&cid=1031779300296&path=!news&s=1045855934842