

US detains hundreds of Muslim immigrants

REUTERS, Los Angeles

Hundreds of Iranian and other Middle East citizens were in southern California jails on Wednesday after coming forward to comply with a new rule to register with immigration authorities only to wind up handcuffed and behind bars.

Shocked and frustrated Islamic and immigrant groups estimate that more than 500 people have been arrested in Los Angeles, neighbouring Orange County and San Diego in the past three days under a new nationwide anti-terrorism program. Some unconfirmed reports put the figure as high as 1,000.

The arrests sparked a demonstration by hundreds of Iranians outside a Los Angeles immigration office. The protesters carried banners saying "What's next? Concentration camps?" and "What happened to liberty and justice?"

A spokesman for the Immigration and Naturalisation Service said no numbers of people arrested would be made public. A Justice Department spokesman could not be reached for comment.

The head of the southern California chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union compared the arrests to the internment of Japanese Americans in camps during the Second World War.

"I think it is shocking what is happening. It is reminiscent of what hap-

pened in the past with the internment of Japanese Americans. We are getting a lot of telephone calls from people. We are hearing that people went down wanting to cooperate and then they were detained," said Ramona Ripston, the ACLU's executive director.

One activist said local jails were so overcrowded that the immigrants could be sent to Arizona, where they could face weeks or months in prisons awaiting hearings before immigration judges or deportation.

"It is a shock. You don't expect this to happen. It is really putting fright and apprehension in the community. People who come from these countries -- this is what they expect from their government. Not from America," said Sabiha Khan of the Southern California chapter of the Council on American Islamic Relations.

The arrests were part of a post Sept. 11 program that requires all males over 16 from a list of 20 Arab or Middle East countries, who do not have permanent resident status in the United States, to register with U.S. immigration authorities.

Monday was the deadline for men from Iran, Iraq, Syria, Libya and Sudan. News of the mass arrests came first in southern California, which is home to more than 600,000 Iranian exiles and their families.

Officials declined to give figures for those arrested or for the numbers of people who turned up to register, be fingerprinted and have their photographs taken.



An opponent of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez carries a poster reading "Carlos doesn't let go the murderer" during a rally blocking a highway in Caracas on Wednesday as a general strike, called by the opposition to oust Chavez, entered its 18th day. The poster shows Chavez getting his head chewed off by union leader Carlos Ortega, of the Federation of Workers of Venezuela.

UN protocol for prevention of torture okayed

AFP, United Nations

The UN General Assembly passed an optional protocol on the prevention of torture on Wednesday, despite US resistance to the measure.

The protocol to the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel or Unusual Treatments was passed by 127 countries voting for it, four against and 42 abstentions.

The United States joined Nigeria, Palau and the Marshall Islands in voting against the protocol.

Although, 18 countries were not present at all for the vote including Iraq, Iran and North Korea -- the three members of President's George W. Bush's axis of evil.

China, Cuba, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Vietnam and Libya were amongst the 42 countries which abstained.

China adds voice to chorus against US missile plans

AFP, Beijing

China has added its voice to a growing international chorus opposing US plans to start deploying a missile shield from 2004, state media said Thursday.

China advocates the "complete prohibition and thorough destruction of all kinds of weapons of mass destruction," the China Daily said, citing Sha Zhukang, the country's top arms control official.

"That's why China is opposed to the development and deployment of the National Missile Defence program, which may undermine the global strategic balance and stability," he said.

US to block ME 'roadmap' until after Israeli polls

AFP, Washington

The United States said Wednesday it would block the adoption of a "roadmap" on Middle East peace until after Israel's election next month, in a stinging diplomatic rebuff to Europe and the Palestinians.

Secretary of State Colin Powell said the international diplomatic quartet on the Middle East would not finalise the plan on Friday at a ministerial level meeting, despite firm calls for such a move from Europe and Jordan.

Israel has heaped pressure on the United States to withhold support for the document, which calls for a Palestinian state by 2005, until after its elections on January 28.

"Because of the Israeli election, because of the number of issues that are before the Israeli public right now, we think it would be wiser in this instance for us to continue to work on the roadmap and wait until after the Israeli election is over," Powell said.

"It's just a matter of weeks until that is resolved," said Powell at a press conference after an European Union-US ministerial meeting.

"Then we will engage with all the parties in the region with respect to a roadmap if we have complete agreement on the elements of the roadmap, at least within the quartet at that time."

The quartet groups the United States, Russia, the EU and United Nations.

Danish Foreign Minister Per Stig Moeller, representing the current EU presidency, Wednesday made clear European disappointment at the US decision.

"To European opinion it's very important that the voters of Israel know what the world thinks about the situation," he said at the press conference.

"It is very important that Israel knows that it must end with two states. And it's very important that the Palestinians know that they will never get to two states if terrorism continues."

Moeller also delivered a strong warning to Israel that continuing to build settlements in the West Bank and Gaza would undermine hopes for peace.

Iraq, Kuwait, KSA to resume talks on Gulf War missing

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia will hold a meeting next month in Jordan to discuss the issue of people reported missing since the 1991 Gulf war, the foreign ministry said here Thursday.

Iraq had since December 1998 boycotted meetings of the so-called tripartite committee in protest at US and British air raids on its territory.

The Iraqi foreign ministry said the agreement to resume talks was spelled out in the minutes of a meeting held by the three Arab countries as well as France, Britain, the United States and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

US shifts priorities for 2003

AFP, Washington

Americans looking to the New Year are rearranging priorities and travel plans and taking a closer look at that stranger in a shop or on a street and at the gaping holes in the security blanket they enjoyed before September 11, 2001 changed all the rules.

Fuelling the national angst were burgeoning threats of more terrorist attacks as the frequency of suicide bombings in the Middle East grew exponentially and the United States girded for war with Iraq.

With terrorist attacks targeting US interests in Asia and Africa and experts warning of a resurgence of the al-Qaeda network that carried out the unprecedented September 11 attacks on New York and Washington, the watchwords for 2003 were: security, security and security.

"They are coming after us," warned Central Intelligence Agency

chief George Tenet in September, referring to an al-Qaeda he said had "reconstituted" itself.

"They want to execute attacks," he said. "The threat environment we find ourselves in today is as bad as it was last summer...It's serious."

"We are entering 2003 with the feeling that something will happen," said John Pike, a security specialist with Globalsecurity.org, who criticised the government for concentrating on Iraq at the expense of stateside threats.

"The reality," he said, "is that we are getting ready to blow up Iraq and nobody is spending much attention on homeland security...until the next attacks."

And there was this caveat from Democratic Senator Bob Graham, outgoing president of the Senate Intelligence Committee:

"It is almost a certainty that in the coming months Americans will face another attempted terrorist assault, an assault that quite possibly could be of the same scale as that of September the 11th, 2001."

Citizens of the United States, whose population includes far more Jews than Israel's, were particularly shaken by the suicide bombing of an Israeli-owned hotel in Mombasa, Kenya, November 28 and the near-miss rocket attack on an Israeli charter flight taking off from Mombasa the same day.



Iraqi Christians light candles during a peace service at Baghdad's Saint Joseph Chaldean Church on Wednesday calling on the people of the United States not to allow a war against Iraq. The emotional peace mass was attended by scores of Iraqis and a US delegation of Christian religious leaders.