

America's Disappeared

The Story of Noor Husain Raza

Noor Husain Raza, a 63-year-old engineer, left Pakistan in 1979. He first emigrated to the United Arab Emirates, where he worked as an engineer in the Dubai police department for more than a decade. In 1992, he came to the United States on a visitor's visa.

When he arrived, Mr. Raza applied for political asylum based on his trade union activism in Pakistan. His asylum request was denied, and he filed a motion to reopen his asylum case. He worked at many jobs, sending money home to a large number of relatives in Pakistan. "Three families, I support," he said. In 1993, he got a job as a baggage handler for Continental Airlines at Newark International Airport in New Jersey. He worked with customers, too, from time to time. "I used to translate for people who don't know the English, especially the Arab people," he said.

His motion to reopen his asylum case was pending when he was arrested at work on Dec. 19, 2001. He showed the agents his airport ID, his company ID and his driver's license. "They said, 'No, we need immigration ID,'" he said. "They just put me in handcuffs."

Mr. Raza was taken to the INS center in Newark, where agents questioned him. "They said, 'Do you know something for this 11th September?'" I said, 'Man, I am a normal guy. Just a worker.'" He was allowed to make collect calls and tried to get legal help. But his lawyer was not available, and a second lawyer (recommended by the secretary of a public official he managed to reach) was on vacation.

Mr. Raza was then taken to Passaic County Jail, in Paterson, New Jersey. When he arrived, his clothes were forcibly removed and a guard performed a body-cavity search. "I said, 'This is against the humanity.'" He said, 'Sir, don't talk. Silence. You have no right to talk.'"

He was placed in a dormitory-style room on the first floor with other new inmates and was present, he said, when guards brought dogs into the dormitory each morning as the detainees were waking up. After a few days of this, Mr. Raza was moved upstairs with the general population of inmates. The jailhouse doctor would not let him see a specialist so he could discuss the medication he needed for



Photo courtesy of Jeff Paterson/Not in Our Name

his heart condition. The guards refused his repeated requests for halal meals. (He was given a Koran.)

"I'm a 61-years-old guy - they throw me in the bag of steel," Mr. Raza said. "This is not human rights. This is not justice."

After one month in jail, Mr. Raza was handed over to immigration agents who handcuffed him, searched him and brought him a paper to sign. "I said, 'Let me read it.' She said no. She said, 'Sir you have to sign. You have to.' Then I signed."

He was put on a plane that landed in Karachi, where, penniless, he made his way to Lahore, many miles away. Mr. Raza remains in Lahore. His arrest and deportation have been a "tragedy" for him, he said. "I'm not a terrorist. My record is neat and clean. I protect the security and integrity of the United States for 10 years in the Newark airport."

Asked if he would return to the United States if he could, he says yes. "The guy who doesn't like dictatorship," he said, "he will always ask for freedom."

Still, he asks how this could have happened to him "when the United States - President Bush - says there is justice, peace and human rights protection, and we are just fighting against the terror ... not against the religion of Islam."

Copyright 2004, American Civil Liberties Union. Reprinted with permission of the American Civil Liberties Union www.aclu.org.