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## Bust of illegal aliens maintaining jets raises safety concerns

GREENSBORO, N.C. (AP) — About 3 1/2 years after 9-11, more than two dozen alleged illegal aliens — including four from so-called countries of special interest for terrorist activity — got jobs maintaining commercial jetliners in North Carolina.

They passed through criminal background checks and Social Security screenings. Six held the Federal Aviation Administration's top mechanical certification, allowing them to clear airplanes to return to service.

Scott Vines — who just learned that the quiet, unassuming Sudanese man who lived in the apartment below him was among those arrested — would like to know how.

"It's one thing to have an illegal alien working soybean fields or tobacco," he says. "But to have somebody working on aircraft ... that is scary."

Just how frightened people should be of last month's roundup of 27 workers at TIMCO Aviation Services' Greensboro facility is open to debate. Some in the industry say it shows the security loopholes in the growing outsourcing of aircraft repairs.

As much as half of the servicing of the nation's airliners is now outsourced to third-party vendors whose mechanics are not required to be certified, or to have the extensive FBI background checks done on in-house airline mechanics.

"Any time we have individuals working at critical infrastructure locations like airports that are not who they say they are and may be utilizing fraudulent documents, it does pose a potential security threat," says Dean Boyd, a spokesman for the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency.

"It exposes a vulnerability, and it also shows that a potential terrorist or criminal could do the same thing."

### Sweep at Greensboro's Piedmont Triad International Airport

On March 8, federal agents swept down upon TIMCO's sprawling facility amid the rolling hills surrounding Piedmont Triad International Airport, where a sign on one hangar reads "\$AFETY PAY\$."

The raid was part of Operation Tarmac, a 3-year-old, multi-

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agency effort that has resulted in 1,120 arrests and 775 indictments at 200 airports. Previous sweeps have netted janitors, food-service employees and even pilots. But never before had so many aircraft mechanics been picked up at one time.

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Most of those arrested came from Central and South America, countries such as Chile, Peru and Venezuela. But two each hailed from Sudan and the Philippines — countries on a Department of Homeland Security watch list for potential terrorist links.

But TIMCO President Gil West says this is strictly an immigration issue and any suggestion of terrorism is exaggerated. The arrested workers, most of whom were outside subcontractors, were all qualified to do the tasks they were assigned and were under the supervision of U.S. citizens federally certified in their fields.

TIMCO officials also noted that the workers with the top certification were working in the sheet metal and seating departments, not on engine systems or other more sensitive areas.

"There isn't a security or safety issue associated with it," says West, whose company does work for United Airlines and other passenger and cargo carriers.

Many of those picked up at TIMCO had allegedly used fake North Carolina driver's licenses to obtain work. According to an affidavit, one Peruvian man told a federal agent he paid \$50 for a fake Social Security card at a Miami soccer park.

Six of those arrested had federal airframe and power plant certificates, the top certification for aircraft mechanics, says FAA spokeswoman Kathleen Bergen.

Bergen says all six passed the tests for that certification, but the agency is looking into whether the men used fraudulent documents to qualify for the tests.

So far, agents have found no link between any of the men and terrorist activities. But Boyd says any of these men could have been subject to blackmail and could have posed a security threat.

#### **Some see link to outsourcing**

Most of the men were contract workers supplied to TIMCO by other companies. Five came from Florida-based Structural Modification and Repair Technicians Inc. — or SMART.

Venezuelan Jorge Ruiz-Alonso, a field labor coordinator for SMART, was not only charged with using falsified documents to get work but is also accused of supplying a fake Social Security number and green card to another illegal alien.

Some see a direct link between outsourcing and the conditions that led to the sting.

Ted Ludwig, a local president with the Aircraft Mechanics Fraternal Association, says contract mechanics are not required to have the same 10-year FBI background checks required of airline employees. And he says the FAA has not kept up with the trend toward outsourcing.

A July 2003 FAA review found that while some major airlines outsource up to 80% of their maintenance, the agency still focused much of its oversight on in-house shops.

"In fact," the report said, "we found that FAA has no process in place to determine how much air carriers use repair stations." That was particularly true of foreign repair stations, in places such as Singapore and China.

"They're outsourcing at all costs," Ludwig says.

Tim Hafer, a former airline mechanic who says he was fired for pointing out unsafe practices, has heard horror stories from colleagues of uncertified contractors who barely speak English being given picture cards so they can perform their jobs. At least two of the men criminally charged in the TIMCO cases had interpreters present at their arraignments.

"Everybody thinks: You know there hasn't been a major plane crash, so why should we worry about it?" Hafer says.

Sarah MacLeod, executive director of the Aeronautical Repair Station Association, of which TIMCO and 700 other companies are members, says people should consider the source of this "sky is falling" mentality.

"The general public should be smart enough to face the facts," she said. "The facts are that ... air travel is still the safest way to get from point A to point B, and we don't intend to let down our scrutiny of the industry."

Part of that scrutiny, she says, will be to determine exactly how the Greensboro situation occurred and how to prevent it from happening again.

### **Background checks may still leave gaps**

SMART Vice President Brian Peterson says his company does a 10-year background check on all of its employees, and that Ruiz-Alonso's "personal paperwork appeared legal in every respect."

West says TIMCO — which has about 1,700 employees and 300 contract workers — conducts a five-year criminal background check and work history on prospective employees, confirms identification numbers with the Social Security Administration and conducts a Patriot Act database search.

West adds that it relies on subcontractors to conduct similar checks before sending workers to TIMCO.

Federal officials say TIMCO has cooperated and has not been charged. But the companies that supplied the suspect workers are under investigation.

West says TIMCO has severed ties with SMART and is working with its other labor vendors to ensure that their employee background checks are at least as stringent as TIMCO's.

### **Goal isn't to prosecute, but to 'identify, dismantle and disrupt**

Of the 27 arrested, 13 have been charged with criminal violations, to which five have pleaded guilty (one criminal case was dismissed because the statute of limitations had expired). Another 13, including Sudanese native Mostafa Osman Mostafa, are charged with administrative violations and are facing deportation.

Greensboro attorney Jeremy McKinney says Mostafa's arrest is a travesty.

McKinney says the 44-year-old mechanic was told to report for fire safety training March 8. Instead of getting training, he was interrogated, detained and shipped off to a remote jail in Louisiana.

McKinney has yet to meet his client in person, and has yet to see any government proof of the charge that he lied to get a foreign agricultural worker amnesty during the Reagan administration. He says Mostafa has had a green card since 1990, has worked faithfully at TIMCO since 1999, and has a wife and two U.S.-born children.

"I just believe that with some of the cases that they're prosecuting, they're overreaching," says McKinney.

But when it comes to people working on airplanes and other "critical infrastructure," caution is the key, says Tom O'Connell, ICE's special agent in charge on the Greensboro arrests.

"Prior to Sept. 11, the goal was to criminally prosecute," he says. "But now it's to identify, disrupt and dismantle — PRIOR to them doing anything."

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