

# The Nation; Immigration a Family Affair for Many Asians; With comparatively few in the U.S. illegally, the concern is the lengthy wait for relatives' visas.: [HOME EDITION]

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## ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

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Not all Asian immigrants, of course, are uninvolved. South Korea and the Philippines both have traditions of ousting dictatorial regimes, and their emigres in the United States are stepping up actions for immigration reform.

At a recent town hall meeting sponsored by the South Asian Network in Artesia, Khadim Hussain spoke of his fears as an illegal immigrant who came to the United States in 1991 to support dozens of destitute family members living in the disputed territory of Kashmir on the India-Pakistan border.

## FULL TEXT

Harish Dhruv did it legally.

A native of India, Dhruv came to the United States on a student visa in 1970, earned an undergraduate degree in textile chemicals, found an employer willing to sponsor him for a green card and obtained citizenship in 1977. Then he petitioned to bring his younger sister here, finally winning approval in 2001 -- after 17 long years.

So ask Dhruv about the immigration debate raging across the nation, and he will tell you his top priority is not legalizing undocumented migrants, nor is it expanding a guest worker program. It is reducing the long wait for visas for family members.

"It's too long," said Dhruv, 60, a South Pasadena financial planner. "I feel it's very unfair to the people who are waiting and to those who want to bring their families together. I want Congress to stop playing politics and resolve this issue in the best interests of legal American citizens, rather than concentrating on the illegals."

Much of the attention so far has been focused on Latinos. But the nation's roughly 10 million Asian immigrants also have an enormous stake in the debate, which will resume as Congress returns from recess this week.

Their priorities, however, are often different from Latinos'.

Statistics help explain why: Only about 8% to 10% of the Asian population is here illegally, compared with more than 20% of Latinos.

Latinos accounted for 78% of the nation's 11 million illegal migrants in 2005, compared with 13% from Asia, according to the Pew Hispanic Center.

As a result, Asian activists say, their communities are most concerned about reducing family visa backlogs -- a goal opposed by some immigration-control groups. Asians also oppose other proposed measures that they say would harshly curtail the civil rights of legal immigrants.

Because their homelands are an ocean away, they are not as concerned with a proposed guest worker program or with enhanced border enforcement.

In addition, more Asians than Latinos are naturalized U.S. citizens, college-educated and professionally employed -- attributes that may make some feel less connected to the struggles of predominantly low-skilled illegal immigrants.

Relatively few Asian immigrants have joined the marches, rallies and other pro-immigrant events that have taken place in cities nationwide, perhaps viewing the movement as a Latino cause.

There are other factors as well. Asian communities' media outlets sometimes lack the breadth and clout of those catering to Latinos, and many Asian immigrants come from countries with less-developed political protest traditions.

"There's a general apathy among Chinese immigrants because they come from societies where they were not allowed to vote or voice their opinions," said Daniel Huang, 38, an Alhambra immigration attorney whose clients are mainly from China and Taiwan.

"If you criticize the government or march in the streets in China, you're harshly punished. The last time they did that, they were run over by tanks," he said, referring to the Chinese government's violent suppression in 1989 of pro-democracy activists in Tiananmen Square.

Not all Asian immigrants, of course, are uninvolved. South Korea and the Philippines both have traditions of ousting dictatorial regimes, and their emigres in the United States are stepping up actions for immigration reform.

Today, Korean American business, faith and community leaders are scheduled to announce plans to join Latinos and other immigrants in the next major immigrant rights' demonstration, set for May 1.

Despite their different priorities, Asian Americans do share some concerns with Latinos about legalization of undocumented immigrants.

At a recent town hall meeting sponsored by the South Asian Network in Artesia, Khadim Hussain spoke of his fears as an illegal immigrant who came to the United States in 1991 to support dozens of destitute family members living in the disputed territory of Kashmir on the India-Pakistan border.

A convenience -store clerk, he has been struggling to pay mounting medical bills for his parents, who were injured in the region's earthquake last year.

"My biggest hope is a green card so I can see my parents again," he said.

Nonetheless, some evidence suggests that people of Asian heritage are less sympathetic than Latinos are to illegal immigrants.

Although the majority of legal Asian immigrants support legalizing the undocumented, one recent multilingual poll sponsored by New America Media, an ethnic media consortium, showed that 39% favored the deportation of all illegal migrants, compared with 8% of legal Latino immigrants who held that view.

A 1994 Times exit poll showed that 47% of Asian Americans voted for Proposition 187, the state initiative that would have denied public benefits to illegal immigrants had it not been struck down by the courts. Less than a quarter of Latino voters supported it.

When San Gabriel attorney Shawn Chou recently spoke about immigration on one of Southern California's most popular Chinese- language radio shows, he said the response startled him: Well more than half of the callers opposed legalizing illegal immigrants, saying they were lawbreakers who shouldn't jump the line and would shrink the pool of public resources.

"If they cross the border illegally, you can't give them citizenship -- it's somewhat unfair to people who waited in line," Joe Fong, 40, a naturalized U.S. citizen from Hong Kong, said at a Monterey Park coffee shop.

Overall, Asian American activists say their greatest priority is to ensure that the issue of more family visas does not get shortchanged in the current policy debate, which so far has focused on illegal immigration and guest worker plans.

Asians face among the longest waits of any immigrant group for relatives' visas. Filipino siblings of U.S. citizens, for instance, face a 23-year wait, according to the U.S. State Department website.

Asian American activists stress the need to work in concert with Latinos to avoid pitting the two communities against each other in the struggle for legalization and family visas.

"We don't want it to become us fighting each other for crumbs," said Karin Wang, an attorney with the Asian Pacific American Legal Center in Los Angeles. "It's important to have a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants, but it needs to go hand in hand with other provisions, such as family reunification."

The quest for more family visas, however, may be a challenge. A House bill passed in December does not include more visas.

The proposal passed by the Senate Judiciary Committee in March, which is seen as more favorable to immigrants, would provide about 250,000 more visas for family members and double to 290,000 annually the number of visas for highly skilled workers, who primarily come from Asia.

After the Senate passes a bill, the two chambers will have to reconcile their versions before they can vote on a final package.

But the expanded family visa provisions are strongly opposed by such immigration-control groups as the Virginia-based NumbersUSA.

Roy Beck, NumbersUSA president, said his organization views the nation's family-based immigration system, which gives entry priority to relatives of citizens, as the key reason immigration to the United States has quadrupled in the last 40 years.

"We consider chain migration to be worse than illegal immigration," said Beck, referring to the way the family-based system can promote the entry of extended chains of relatives.

He predicted that any compromise legislation would be more likely to include a guest worker program and legalization of illegal immigrants than more family visas.

"Frankly, illegal aliens seem to have a much stronger hold on Congress because they're already here," he said. "They're marching in the streets, living with U.S. citizens who are voters and are already part of the economy."

Asian and Asian American activists are also concerned about provisions in the House and Senate bills that would make it harder for legal residents to win U.S. citizenship, eliminate their right to seek judicial review of denied citizenship petitions and expand deportation powers.

Many South Asians in particular are concerned about provisions in both bills that affirm the right of local police to enforce immigration law.

Hamid Khan of the South Asian Network said the 9/11 terrorist attacks have prompted hate crimes against Pakistanis and other South Asians, along with ethnic profiling.

Many fear the immigration proposals will exacerbate those problems, Khan said.

"The enforcement issue is a very deep concern that stems from [South Asians'] anxiety that they're a targeted community to start with," he said.

Such concerns have pushed activists to expand their efforts to educate and organize their communities. Khan's group, for example, is launching teach-ins and town hall meetings around the region.

"Many people in the Asian community didn't realize they have a stake in this conversation, but now there is sudden interest," said Wang, of the Asian Pacific American Legal Center. "We feel we have to step up and speak with a louder voice."

### Illustration

Caption: PHOTO: SPEAKER: Radio host Shonali Bose addresses the forum. Asians face among the longest waits of any group for relatives' visas.; PHOTOGRAPHER: Stephen Osman Los Angeles Times; PHOTO: SHARED CONCERN: Immigrants from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka attend a forum on immigration in Artesia.; PHOTOGRAPHER: Stephen Osman Los Angeles Times

Credit: Times Staff Writer

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