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No big fish in 9/11 dragnet

City catch included hustlers & those with visa woes

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The dragnet that swept through New York in search of terrorists in the days after Sept. 11 scraped up mostly a handful of small-time hustlers and hapless immigrants with visa problems.

Federal authorities say 104 people arrested in the Sept. 11 attack investigation have been charged criminally. They released a list of 95 names, including 18 from New York.

Attorney General John Ashcroft declared that an unspecified number of those in custody have been linked to Osama Bin Laden's Al Qaeda terrorist network — but he won't say which ones.

Ashcroft also said investigators believe the arrests and detentions have thwarted terrorist plots since 19 hijackers flew passenger jets into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and crashed one in Pennsylvania.

But an examination of the 18 local cases filed by prosecutors in New York and New Jersey makes clear that none are charged with offenses directly related to the attack. Charges against two of the men in Brooklyn were abruptly dropped yesterday.

Accused of lying

In one case, Osama Awadalla, a San Diego college student, was charged with lying about knowing hijacker Khalid Al-Mihdhar. He is not charged with knowledge of the plot.

Mohammed Pervez of Jersey City has been charged with bank fraud but was detained because he lived with two men suspected of being would-be hijackers. Pervez denies knowing anything about any terrorist plot.

In Passaic, N.J., Mustafa Kilfat and his father, Ahmad, were picked up because he was driving a red Pontiac — a car law enforcement officials briefly believed was connected to the attacks.

Police found $11,000 in cash and a one-way ticket to Syria in the car. Kilfat wound up charged with visa fraud and his father with credit card fraud. Both deny knowing anything about the Sept. 11 attack.

Three other New Jersey men, Hussein and Nasser Abuali and Rabi Ahmed, were charged with possessing stolen Kellogg's cereal worth nearly $90,000. The alleged plot took place last spring, long before the attacks.

At Kennedy Airport, Ali Alfatimi and Basam Nahshal were arrested last month for allegedly violating currency laws by trying to ship $140,763 out of the U.S. Some of the money was stashed inside boxes of honey.

The arrest came days after a report that Osama Bin Laden's Al Qaeda network used honey shops in the Middle East to launder money.

But yesterday, federal prosecutors abruptly dismissed the case against Alfatimi and Nahshal, who had been held without bail since Oct. 16.

Matter of business

A search of Nahshal's luggage, which included seven cardboard boxes, showed "jars of honey, and in between the jars of honey a large quantity of United States currency."

Alfatimi later "admitted that for the last 18 months, as part of his travel agency business, he had been sending monetary instruments to Yemen."

Assistant U.S. Attorney Samantha Schreiber declined to say why the charges had been dropped.

In another case, Ahmed Abdulla Elashmouny, owner of Delta Aviation Flight Academy at Republic Airport in Farmingdale, L.I., was indicted on charges he tried to obtain insurance for a plane he damaged during a landing in Westhampton, L.I., on June 20 — three months before the World Trade Center attack.

Elashmouny opened the flight school while authorities were attempting to deport him for two federal convictions, one for credit card fraud in 1993 and another for selling phony visas in 1998. An Egyptian citizen, Elashmouny was appealing the deportation order.

In the current case, he is accused of falsely claiming to be a U.S. citizen on a Federal Aviation Administration form used to renew his status as a flight instructor.

With Mike Claffey

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