

Enforcement shift: employees not the target

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The disclosure Wednesday that illegal immigrants in Seattle were given permission to work in the country has triggered alarms on Capitol Hill that the Obama administration is making a fundamental shift in the enforcement of the nation's immigration laws.

Members of the House Homeland Security Appropriations Subcommittee are expected to demand answers from Homeland Security Department officials today about why 27 illegal immigrants were released from detention and given work permits.

The immigrants were arrested in February during a raid of the Yamato Engine Specialists plant in a suburb of Seattle.

Lawmakers are trying to determine where the Obama administration is heading with its immigration enforcement policy, mainly because senior administration officials have said the emphasis for Immigration and Customs Enforcement will be on going after unscrupulous employers and criminal illegal immigrants instead of rounding up and deporting undocumented workers who do not pose any threat.

In addition, Homeland Security Secretary Napolitano has been reviewing the Seattle raid and delayed other worksite actions pending a decision to issue guidelines for future raids, the Seattle Times reported Wednesday.

"Given DHS's new 'rules of engagement' on worksite enforcement and 'prioritization' of criminal aliens, it suggests a coordinated effort in the administration to degrade the fundamental ICE mission of enforcing our basic immigration laws," Homeland Security Appropriations Subcommittee ranking member Harold Rogers, R-Ky., said in a statement.

"If you illegally enter this country or overstay your visa, you have broken federal law," he added. "Further, if ICE agents are being pressured to back away from enforcing the immigration laws of this country or if this release practice is typical, we in Congress need to know."

But Rogers added that initial news accounts about the release of the illegal immigrants in Seattle need to be scrutinized.

A spokesman for Homeland Security Appropriations Subcommittee Chairman David Price, D-N.C., said Price "hopes that this issue will get fully addressed in the hearing."

After Rogers expressed outrage earlier Wednesday over the incident in Seattle, Homeland Security officials rushed to Capitol Hill to brief Rogers and Price about what happened.

They offered assurances that what occurred in Seattle does not represent a policy shift, explaining that the work authorizations were given to the illegal immigrants to facilitate their cooperation in an ongoing investigation, according to sources. The authorizations are only valid while the investigation is open.

Homeland Security spokesman Matthew Chandler said in an interview that work authorizations have been given to illegal immigrants in the past.

"This has happened in the past and no, it does not represent a change in DHS policy," he said.

Homeland Security officials testifying today will likely be caught in the crossfire of jawboning lawmakers over the best way to enforce the nation's immigration laws.

The officials are expected to tell lawmakers that enforcement operations under the Bush administration were focused on going after employers who knowingly hired illegal immigrants.

But advocates for immigrants have accused the Bush administration of taking a harsh and, at times, Draconian approach toward illegal immigrants, including imprisonment and deportation.

A report released Wednesday by the pro-immigrant group America's Voice cited a history of disproportionate actions against undocumented workers versus their employers.

"In the workplace, the Bush administration's immigration enforcement strategy focused intensely on punishing immigrant workers, while employers who broke labor and immigration laws were much less of a priority," the report concluded. These employers, the report said, were given "the equivalent of a corporate parking ticket" by the Bush administration.