

Alien alarm: out of jail

'Emergency situation'

BY CHITRA RAGAVAN

The first of nearly 3,400 non-U.S. citizens with serious criminal histories could be released from federal immigration detention facilities as early as this week. Their release follows a June Supreme Court ruling that bars the government from indefinitely detaining "criminal aliens" after they have served out their sentences, if their own countries refuse to take them back. The Immigration and Naturalization Service has held these ex-cons in detention centers and local jails, sometimes for months, even years, while trying to deport them. The ruling has created an "emergency situation," says Attorney General John Ashcroft, adding, "Their history of serious crime makes them a threat to our community."

Four countries—Cuba, Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia—refuse to take back their citizens, in defiance of international law.



Five detainees at the INS's San Pedro, Calif., facility

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Justice Department officials say that of the 3,400 detainees, 1,200 are from those four countries and Jamaica, which is slow to take back convicts. The additional 2,200 detainees are from 113 other nations.

Ashcroft says he's considering urging the State Department to stop granting visas to nationals of countries that refuse

to cooperate. He says the department is considering legal ways to detain these criminal immigrants until they can be deported. But immigration and civil rights groups are threatening legal action. "These are individuals lost in limbo, lost in the cracks," says Judy Rabinovitz of the American Civil Liberties Union. |

Gunning for gumshoes

More foul-ups at the FBI

BY CHITRA RAGAVAN

You know things are going badly for the venerable Federal Bureau of Investigation when even longtime defender Sen. Orrin Hatch joins the chorus of critics. But there the Utah Republican sat last week, along with many colleagues, attacking the bureau's operational blunders, most notably the fact that the feds could not account for hundreds of laptop computers and guns. Just two months ago, the bureau admitted to failing to release thousands of pages of key documents in the Oklahoma City bombing case. The lost weapons numbered nearly 450 handguns, rifles, and submachine guns. One of the missing weapons was ultimately used during a felony assault and robbery in a Detroit bar. And at least one of the 184 missing



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The FBI's headquarters in Washington, D.C.

|"The agency has "serious management problems."

computers contained classified data.

The loss represents only a fraction of the bureau's 13,000 laptops and nearly 50,000 weapons. But imagewise, the disclosure could not have come at a worse time for the beleaguered agency. It led to a fresh wave of finger-pointing by Congress and to calls for wholesale reform of the agency whose accomplishments have become buried in a mound of controversies. Among them: the Wen Ho Lee espionage case and the Robert Hanssen spy caper. The latest disclosure reveals "very, very serious management problems,"

Democratic Sen. Patrick Leahy of Vermont, chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, said during a hearing before his panel last week. "Lax administrative controls," agreed Hatch.

Routine inventory. A bureau source says the guns were found missing in recent months after a routine biennial inventory and after a congressional inquiry into a similar problem at the Immigration and Naturalization Service. Attorney General John Ashcroft has ordered Glenn Fine, the Justice Department's inspector general, to probe the loss

of guns and laptops at all Justice agencies.

The bureau would like to resolve at least some of its problems so that its new director-designate, Robert Mueller, can concentrate on other matters. The hearing on his confirmation is scheduled for July 30.

But more storm clouds are forming. Coming soon: After months of procrastination, the FBI has declassified a scathing Justice Department report detailing how the bureau botched its investigation of Lee, the former Los Alamos scientist once accused of spying for China. |