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Protest against sting arrests of South Asian store clerks and owners

Campaign Organizers say community is new target in the 'War on Drugs'

On Jan. 8, over 300 people in Decatur, Ga., protested the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency's (DEA) sting operation, called "Operation Meth Merchant."

The DEA Campaign, conducted in July 2005, sent shockwaves among South Asians in northwest Georgia after it led to the arrests of nearly 50 store clerks and shop owners from the community. Those arrested have been accused of allegedly selling certain products despite the knowledge that they can be used in making the illegal drug methamphetamine ("meth").



photo appears courtesy Alka Roy

The organizer of the protest, Racial Justice Campaign Against Operation Meth Merchant, claimed that the event which was followed by a press meeting was an "overwhelming success." Members mobilized defendants, families, and community members over several months to speak out against, what they consider "outrageous targeting of the South Asian community in Northwest Georgia."

Speakers included Ajamu Baraka from the U.S. Human Rights Network, Lisa Wang, American Civil Liberties Union lawyer, McCracken Poston, a lawyer for several of the defendants, Upendra Patel, president of the Asian American Convenience Store Owners Association, Aparna Bhattacharyya of Raksha, and Shareef Cousins of Fairness for Prisoners' Families.

Through freedom songs and chants in Gujarati, Hindi and English, the protesters made the gathering a peaceful, yet powerful, community event.

Operation Meth Merchant, according to the organizer, is part of the U.S. government's "War on Drugs." Northwest Georgia is known as the number one meth producing area in the country. Meth is a highly addictive stimulant that can be made with common household products such as Sudafed and charcoal. These products may be purchased legally; but when used in certain combinations and quantities, they can be used to create meth. Methamphetamine production is in itself a dangerous process that has many times resulted in deaths due to fires and explosions.

According to the Racial Justice Campaign, in Georgia, the government's operation involved the use of a dozen, mostly white, English-speaking informants who had already been convicted of possessing, producing and selling meth.

The protest was organized to highlight the fact that even though 75 percent of the convenience store owners in the area are white, and stores such as Wal-Mart, CVS and Target sold the same products, only small, South Asian-owned convenience stores were targeted. All but one of the 24 stores that was targeted are South-Asian owned, and all but five of the 49 individuals eventually prosecuted were of South Asian descent -- 33 have the last name



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Patel. Many of those who were charged do not speak English well. “In a time where the fear of immigrants is freely promoted in the name of patriotism, the limited English skills and brown skin color of South Asian store owners and clerks made them easy targets for entrapment by a government agency whose budget depends on the number of successful prosecutions they can complete,” said Deepali Gokhale, campaign organizer for the Racial Justice Campaign. “While the government’s activities have been roundly and publicly criticized for misidentifications, the use of faulty evidence, and targeting of a small and vulnerable immigrant community, there has not yet been enough public outcry about the racial targeting to stop the prosecutions.”

Those who have been indicted through Operation Meth Merchant face up to 25 years in prison, forfeiture of their stores and fines of up to \$250,000. Most are likely to be deported due to immigration laws that lead to the deportation of anyone convicted of drug-related crimes at a federal level, despite their ties to the community, American-born children with U.S. citizenship, or long-time residency in this country.

“My mother, wife, and everybody just cry all day long,” says one of those indicted. “I cannot sleep. I have been under house arrest for seven months. I feel so terrible.... I don’t have the income to pay all these [fines].... They just hate us.”

According to Deepa Iyer, executive director of South Asian American Leaders of Tomorrow (SAALT), “The U.S.’s drug policies and enforcement have often had a devastating impact on communities of color whose voices and political power are marginalized. We are concerned that with Operation Meth Merchant in Georgia, South Asian community members have become the new targets in our country’s War on Drugs.” SAALT is among the many local, Georgia-based and national organizations that are part of the Racial Justice Campaign Against Operation Meth Merchant, which hopes to mobilize communities of all races and ethnicities to stop the racially targeted prosecutions. “People in northwest Georgia need to know they aren’t alone,” said Priyanka Sinha of Raksha, an organization based in Atlanta that provides a range of services for the South Asian community. “We are mobilizing the South Asian community as well as all communities concerned with justice across Georgia. We won’t take this lying down.”

Upendra Patel, a coalition member from AACSA, says “The South Asian community stands united with allies to speak out against the racially biased enforcement of drug laws and the unfair targeting of Indians in the government’s Operation Meth Merchant”.



photo appears courtesy Daniel Berger, ACLU