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ASIAN AMERICANS
ADVANCING
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ASIAN LAW CAUCUS

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Civil Rights Groups Commend Department of State Inspector General Investigation Into Allegations of Improper Seizures of U.S. Passports at the U.S. Embassy in Yemen

New York – Today, Asian Americans Advancing Justice – Asian Law Caucus (Advancing Justice - Asian Law Caucus) and the CLEAR project (Creating Law Enforcement Accountability and Responsibility) of Main Street Legal Services at CUNY School of Law commend the U.S. Department of State (the Department) Office of the Inspector General (OIG) on the report of its investigation into allegations of improper seizure of passports at the U.S. Embassy in Sana’a, Yemen. In January 2016, Advancing Justice – Asian Law Caucus and the CLEAR project had submitted [a request](#) to the OIG for an investigation into summary and unwarranted passport revocations of American citizens at the Embassy.

As the OIG report outlines, between 2012 and 2014, a Department employee at the Sana’a Embassy seized the passports of numerous American citizens, many who were there to apply for passports for their children.

In the cases the OIG was able to examine, the Department had a 100% failure rate to follow all of the requisite procedures when a passport is retained or confiscated. The report also highlights the Department’s poor record keeping practices, and it is clear that the report only covers the tip of the iceberg as the Department itself did not have a comprehensive understanding of the scope of the problem, at different times quoting different numbers of affected individuals to the OIG. The report notes staff at headquarters in Washington, D.C. only became aware of this issue when reported to them by the National Security Council – and not through any internal Department channels.

The report confirmed the devastating aspects of Advancing Justice- Asian Law Caucus and CLEAR’s original request – that the Department held onto passports of American citizens in most cases for nearly a year before providing any information on next steps individuals could take despite repeated contact from these individuals. The report does not directly address, but lays bare that it was Arab Muslim American citizens who were denied their right to travel without recourse, and that this situation dragged on as long as it did because of their religious and ethnic identities.

“The report documents the systemic lack of accountability as our clients experienced coercive interviews and subsequent seizures of their U.S. passports,” said Elica Vafaie, Staff Attorney & Program Manager at Advancing Justice - Asian Law Caucus “and is an important step to addressing this alarming issue.”

“The report highlights the troubling fact that once senior Department staff in Washington, D.C. became aware of the misconduct and its scope, their reaction was to try to cover it up instead of helping the many American citizens stuck overseas return to the United States,” said Naz Ahmad, Staff Attorney at the CLEAR project.

The OIG was also able to confirm, as Advancing Justice - Asian Law Caucus and CLEAR have stated unequivocally from the beginning, that there no particular national security concerns related to the individuals whose passports were seized, despite the Department’s repeated assertions that there were national security concerns.

For any individuals who have concerns about passport seizures or renewing their passports, please review this Know Your Rights guide in [English](#) and [Arabic](#). If you apply for a passport and a law enforcement official approaches you for questioning or for a DNA test, consult an attorney before you speak with them.

If you are in the New York area, please call (718) 340-4558.

If you are in California, please call (415) 848-7711.

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Advancing Justice - Asian Law Caucus was founded in 1972 as the nation's first legal and civil rights Asian American organization. Recognizing that social, economic, political and racial inequalities continue to exist in the United States, Advancing Justice - Asian Law Caucus is committed to the pursuit of equality and justice for all sectors of our society, with a specific focus directed toward addressing the needs of low-income, immigrant and underserved Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders.

The CLEAR project (Creating Law Enforcement Accountability & Responsibility) is based out of Main Street Legal Services, Inc., the clinical arm of CUNY School of Law. CLEAR serves Arab, Muslim, South Asian and other communities that are disparately affected by post-9/11 law enforcement policies and practices.