

Anger in India over fake US university sting operation

Shuriah Niazi 06 February 2019

The recent arrest of Indian students who had enrolled in a fake institution, the University of Farmington, Michigan, has prompted a strong reaction in India after it emerged that it had been set up and run by undercover agents for the United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency.

As many as 130 students, 129 of them Indian, were arrested this week for enrolling in a fake university. The US Justice Department's Michigan branch also announced the arrest of eight men, who are Indian citizens or American citizens of Indian descent for acting as recruiters. They have been charged with visa fraud and harbouring aliens for profit.

India has reacted strongly to the arrests of its students and swiftly lodged a protest with the US embassy in New Delhi in what is being underlined as a 'rare' diplomatic démarche after the sting operation by US authorities to trap racketeers who abuse the student visa to help unqualified foreigners stay and work.

"We underlined that students, who may have been duped into enrolling in the 'University', should be treated differently from those recruiters who have duped them," the Indian Ministry of External Affairs said in a statement. The ministry urged the US authorities to release the students from detention without deporting them.

The **statement** issued on 2 February said the Indian government had urged the US side to share full details and regular updates of the students with the government, to release them from detention and not to deport them against their wish. India is concerned over the dignity and well-being of detained students, it said.

The Indian embassy in the US is reaching out to the affected students – around 600 of them in all – and is providing them with legal assistance with the help of community leaders. According to officials, there was no way for the students to verify the institution's authenticity online.

Debate in India

Although the US authorities have been maintaining that the students knew the scheme was illegal, the general perception in India, where the incident was widely reported in the media, is that most of the arrested students are innocent and did not know that they were attending

a fake institution.

Indian academics said the US government acted unethically by setting up a fake university to lure students.

“It cannot be said with any certainty that the students knew that they were enrolling in an illegal programme and the Indian government has also expressed apprehension that many of them may have been duped,” said Subhash Patankar, a lecturer in the engineering department at Devi Ahilya Vishwavidyalaya, a state university in Indore.

He said the students were tricked into enrolling. “The US government set the snare. If the students are deported, it would antagonise the student community both in India and America at a time when countries like Canada and Australia are opening their doors and taking positive measures to attract the pool of talent from India,” he said.

Another academic, Surendra Bhatti, who is a visiting faculty in many engineering colleges in central India, said many Indians did not appreciate the way the US government had acted, as immigration authorities have tightened enforcement in recent years. Many said it was wrong and immoral to ‘entrap’ the students.

“It was not the right thing to do,” Bhatti said. “Students are being treated like criminals. They are the victims of a scam.”

He said the students had entered the US legally. “It is really sad. They face deportation or criminal charges. It must be a very traumatic experience for them and their families back in India. We know the relatives of the detained students are worried.”

However, the initial reaction by US authorities was that the Indians were “aware they were committing a crime”, according to a State Department statement.

“All participants in this scheme knew that the University of Farmington had no instructors or classes (neither online nor in-person) and were aware they were committing a crime in an attempt to fraudulently remain in the United States,” a State Department spokesperson said in a statement last Monday.

Hoping to repair damage

Nonetheless the State Department has acknowledged the alarm the incident has provoked in India. Hoping to repair the diplomatic damage and shore up confidence in the US as a study destination, the State Department has described the incident as an “unfortunate aberration in the proud history of India-US educational exchanges”.

However, students, academics and educational counsellors in India feel it could lead to fewer students heading for the US for studies in the near future.

“The US move has reinforced the fear among students and guardians here that the

environment in America is uncertain and hostile,” said Asfia Zafar, a student at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. “The incident has created panic.”

This is not the first time US authorities have used a fake university in a sting operation. In 2012, under the administration of president Barack Obama, the US Department of Homeland Security and the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency created the **fake University of Northern New Jersey** in order to investigate student visa fraud. Some 21 people were arrested in 2016 in connection with the case and more than 1,000 students, mainly from India and China, had their visas revoked.

In 2016 the US authorities gave students the option of returning to India or re-enrolling in a legitimate institution and course within a given time, allowing them to remain in the US without breaching any rules. However it is not yet clear how US authorities will proceed in the case of the Farmington University sting.

<https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20190206121704556>