

Man charged in visa fraud scheme

English language schools were used in ploy to permit foreign nationals, including Russian prostitutes, to enter the U.S., officials say.

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The operator of two English language schools was charged Wednesday with running a scheme that allowed foreign nationals, including several Russian prostitutes, to fraudulently obtain student visas to enter and stay in the United States.

Bezhad "Ben" Zaman, 50, of Beverly Hills, a naturalized U.S. citizen from Iran, was arrested by federal agents without incident in what investigators believe is the largest student visa fraud scheme ever staged on the West Coast, authorities said. He was charged with seven counts of fraud and misuse of visa, one count of conspiring to money-launder and six counts of concealment for money laundering.

"This flagrant violation of our immigration laws shows how greed can compromise our national security," U.S. Atty. Thomas P. O'Brien said.

"We welcome legitimate students who want to take advantage of educational opportunities in America. We do not welcome so-called students who have no intention of studying and who simply want to exploit an unscrupulous business owner more interested in lining his pockets than following the law," O'Brien said.

Zaman runs Concord English Language Center and the International College for English Studies, both on Wilshire Boulevard. He is suspected of helping ineligible foreign nationals fraudulently obtain student visas and keeping them enrolled in his schools even though they did not attend classes, authorities said.

The so-called F-1 visas allow foreigners to remain in the country as long as they are studying full time at a federally approved school.

Both of Zaman's schools had received federal approval.

But investigators allege that as early as 1999, Zaman had been charging foreign nationals several thousand dollars each to obtain student visas. He allegedly told them that although they did not have to attend his schools, they would be reported to federal authorities if they stopped paying tuition.

On one occasion, Zaman allegedly charged a non-student \$300 a month to keep her enrollment current, authorities said.

In another instance, a Thai national told agents that she paid \$2,000 a year to obtain immigration status from International College even though she did not attend classes.

Investigators allege that several of the people who obtained fraudulent student visas by enrolling in Zaman's schools were Russian prostitutes.