

Feds: Lawyers helped Chinese lie to stay in US

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NEW YORK — Law firms systematically submitted fraudulent asylum applications for Chinese immigrants falsely claiming government persecution and coached applicants on how to lie to federal authorities to back up their fictitious stories, federal prosecutors said Tuesday.

Some of the applications also falsely claimed that asylum seekers were forced to have abortions because of China's family planning policies, investigators said.

Authorities believe the scheme went on for as a decade and allowed an untold number of immigrants from around New York City to stay in the country illegally.

Indictments unsealed on Tuesday charged 26 people working with at least 10 firms in separate but overlapping conspiracies to commit immigration fraud.

Among those charged were six attorneys, four translators and a church employee who provided training for non-Christian applicants pretending to be Christians who had been persecuted in China.

"The defendants allegedly conspired criminally to exploit the safe haven our nation provides asylum seekers," George Venizelos, head of the New York FBI office, said in a statement.

Such fraud "makes it more difficult for those who are legitimately seeking refuge in this country," added U.S. Attorney Preet Bharara.

Prosecutors alleged that the law firms submitted hundreds of phony asylum applications for immigrants from Manhattan's Chinatown and Chinese neighborhoods in Queens.

After the applicants were coached on what to say, translators would accompany them to their interviews with immigration authorities to make sure they stuck to their concocted stories about religious or political abuse in China, authorities said.

If the application was denied, corrupt attorneys would take up the cases before an immigration judge, prosecutors said. The lawyers were accused of scripting false answers for their clients in violation of an oath to tell the truth.

Two defendants face up to 25 years in prison if convicted of the most serious charges.

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