

A cautionary tale for people with Arabic names

DR RAHINAH Ibrahim used to be very mystified but is now vexed to the point of being litigious that her name surreally supplements the United States terrorist watch list, all 400,000 to 900,000 of them.

She unwittingly stumbled into the watch list in 2005 when she was about to catch a flight to Hawaii for a conference when her name popped up in the US Transport Security Authority's "no-fly list", the American classification that not only must you be stopped from flying but also be detained and interrogated at will.

Nevertheless, after a lengthy interrogation that made her miss her flight, Rahinah was eventually allowed to fly to Hawaii, after which she flew back to Malaysia but has since been barred from re-entering the US on some shadowy justification of security risk.

After filing her lawsuit in 2010 and almost eight years to her ordeal, Rahinah gets her day in a US

Federal Court to clear her name — from wrongful arrest to purging her watch list record to lifting her entry ban into American soil.

It won't be a cakewalk but at least Rahinah secured a trial when others ensnared like her failed, often at the starting line, so her lawsuit is a landmark case that had traction from major media powerhouses, the *New York Times* included.

It helped that judge William Alsup, who heard Rahinah's pre-trial arguments, dismissed the US Justice Department lawyers' contention that the trial should be dropped on his ruling that the Feds were "abusing the secrecy privilege".

This might be comedic if not for the seriousness of the case, but Alsup also ruled as "baloney" the five-year-old information (on Rahinah) that another 9/11 is going to happen if the Justice Department somehow release it.

Rahinah's lawsuit is tactical: she does not aim at the formidable TSA, which governs all security

issues at exit and entry points, where challenging their defence cordon is "virtually impossible", based on the law that created the TSA.

Instead, Rahinah's legal team aimed at the FBI's Terrorist Screening Centre because somehow the TSC is not accorded the same legal protection. That remains to be seen as the trial proceeds.

To put things in perspective, Rahinah is fortunate: she is safe in Malaysia although her record in the US is shrouded under the suspicion that she is linked to some variable of terrorism, particularly the virulent strain bubbling in certain Middle Eastern states determined to launch improvised explosive devices in American cities.

Terrorists, real, imagined or alleged as defined by the US Department of Homeland Security, have a very short window of survival.

They or their ilk may fail to enter the US under false pretences to launch the IEDs but their movements are scrupulously monitored by the National Security Agency, who passes their location to the

CIA to covertly use drones (bombed loaded unmanned aircraft) to kill them, incinerating also their comrades, families, friends, communities and villages.

The wicked collateral damage since 2004? CIA drone attacks killed nearly 3,600 people in Pakistan, including 1,000 civilians and 200 children. The Obama administration has been silent in rationalising these annihilations.

Theoretically, everyone on the watch list, or the 21,000-odd on the no-fly list, risk getting slaughtered by drone attacks, but so far, covert drone launches have been confined to Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia.

In the meantime, the watch list is still an obnoxious menace: anyone, Malaysians included, with an Arabic sounding name or rhymes with Abdullah, can be snared. Take a look at the FBI Most Wanted List at the TSC website.

Not just Malaysians but anyone in the world who had ever been pulled aside for no reason other than racial profiling, the misfortune of mistaken identity or bearing the name of a wanted terrorist

will have a stake at what Rahinah, deputy dean of Universiti Putra Malaysia's Faculty of Design and Architecture, is attempting.

Another case in point: don't get too cosy if your visa to enter the US is speedily approved because that is just the "honeypot" to lull and lure the person, until they are shackled away at US immigration for further probing.

Yet, for all the outrage against the US' extreme security paranoia, their effort to protect Americans is sympathised and understood. But there has to be a more humane way to separate the wheat from the chaff.

Rahinah might take cold comfort that she was able to return home in one piece, if she could empathise with the "droned" Pakistanis, Yemenis and Somalians, and still had the gumption to file that lawsuit.

This could be taken as a badge of honour: Rahinah is in the same league as the late Nelson Mandela, the slayer of the apartheid beast who was, embarrassingly to the Americans, in the same watchlist until 2008.



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