

Trial begins in M'sian's legal challenge to US no-fly list

SAN FRANCISCO: An eight-year legal odyssey by a Malaysian university professor to clear her name from the US government's no-fly list went to trial in the federal court here.

Rahinah Ibrahim claims she was mistakenly placed on the list because of her national origin and Muslim faith. She has fought in court since her arrest at the San Francisco International Airport in January 2005 to clear her name.

Several similar lawsuits are pending across the United States, but Rahinah's legal challenge appears to be the first to go to trial, which began on Monday.

Unlike a typical American trial, where details important and mundane are disclosed, Rahinah's legal challenge has run head-on into the US government's state secret privilege that allows it to decline to disclose vital evidence if prosecutors can show a threat to national security.

Rahinah's lawyer is barred by

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— ELIZABETH PIPKIN

court orders and national security provisions from delving too deeply into the inner workings of the government administration of its suspected lists of terrorists.

Federal prosecutor Lily Farel told the judge the government could not respond to any of Rahinah's claims because of national security interests.

At one point yesterday, US District Judge William Alsup cleared the court of spectators so three slides containing classified information could be discussed behind closed doors.

Before and after the closed ses-

sion, federal prosecutors lobbed a steady stream of objections when Rahinah's lawyer came close to discussing her client's current no-fly list status and details of how she came to be included on such a list.

Rahinah is even barred from entering the United States to testify.

Through testimony videotaped in London and shown to the judge yesterday, who will decide the case without a jury, Rahinah denied she was affiliated with any terrorist organisation.

Rahinah, 48, lives in Malaysia with her husband and four children and is dean of the design and architecture faculty at Universiti Putra Malaysia.

Rahinah said her trouble with the US government began on Dec 23, 2004, when two FBI agents showed up at her home near Stanford University, where she was pursuing a doctoral degree in architecture.

She said the agents told her she had been blacklisted by the US

government and she was asked if she had heard of the Malaysia-based terror organisation Jemaah Islamiyah.

Rahinah said she replied that she knew of the group only through news accounts. She said she was also asked about her involvement with the Muslim community in the San Francisco Bay Area.

The next month, she was detained at San Francisco airport as she was preparing to fly to Malaysia.

She caught a plane to Malaysia the next day and has been barred from entering the United States since.

Her lawyers have argued that Rahinah was mistakenly placed on the no-fly list and bureaucrats and lawyers have refused to disclose the reasons for her inclusion or consider arguments for her removal.

"Once you're in the system, it's almost impossible to get out," Rahinah's lawyer Elizabeth Pipkin told the judge in her opening statements. — AP