

Lincoln Journal Star (Nebraska)

February 18, 2006

Visa holdup keeps professor from job at UNL

MATTHEW HANSEN, LINCOLN JOURNAL STAR

LINCOLN, NE

Immigration officials give no reason for the inaction on Bolivian man's application.

A Bolivian history professor hired last year by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln can't start his job because U.S. immigration officials have been blocking the visa process for the past eight months.

The unexplained delay baffles academic colleagues, frustrates UNL's immigration expert and angers opponents of the U.S.A. Patriot Act, who see Waskar Ari's case as further evidence that the law is being used arbitrarily to punish people who have no connection to terrorism.

"It would have to be unimaginable circumstances for someone from Bolivia to be classified as a security risk," said Barbara Weinstein, president-elect of the American Historical Association.

"It seems, on the face of it, to be absurd. ... They should either give us the facts or give him a visa."

The UNL history department hired Ari last spring as an assistant professor of history and ethnic studies.

The department viewed the recent Georgetown University doctoral graduate as a prize catch after he turned down several other job offers.

Ari, a member of a Bolivian indigenous community, is an expert on the indigenous history of Latin America, a discipline that dovetails nicely with UNL's emphasis on the Native history of the Great Plains.

But the process of getting Ari back from Bolivia, where he had returned to visit family, soon stalled.

A seemingly routine H-1B visa form completed by the university was neither accepted nor rejected by immigration officials after the 15-day waiting period passed, then three months, then six.

Peter Levitov, associate dean of international affairs and the university's special counsel on immigration, has repeatedly and unsuccessfully tried to learn the reason for the delay. The silence leads him to believe the holdup is security related.

"We can't do anything about it now except wait," says Levitov. "The more time passes, the more it becomes clear he's not going to be able to come here.

"That's very disappointing to the university and surely very disappointing to him."

Ari couldn't be reached for comment Friday.

The American Historical Association has taken up Ari's cause in recent weeks after several U.S. history professors who know him argued for action.

The president, past president and president-elect of the nation's most influential historical organization wrote a letter to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice pleading Ari's case and sent copies to the Department of Homeland Security, Sen. Chuck Hagel, Sen. Ben Nelson and Rep. Jeff Fortenberry.

In the letter, they argue that Ari is a political moderate, not threatening to the United States in any way.

"In the absence of any connection to extremist groups, we fear Dr. Ari is being subject to 'conspicuous revision' solely due to his indigenous identity," they wrote.

"Rather than being a question of national security, this appears to be a case of racial profiling."

The historical association's officials came to that conclusion, President-elect Weinstein says, because they believe there's no other explanation.

"He's not been living among militant revolutionaries the last few years," says Weinstein, a University of Maryland history professor. "He's been going to Georgetown."

Faculty at the history department at Georgetown are similarly confused about Ari's visa struggle, according to John McNeill, history professor and director of graduate studies.

When Ari came to Georgetown, he couldn't speak much English, McNeill says, and didn't know much about the proper study of history.

But he amazed the faculty with his ability to learn on the fly and impressed them with his devotion to historical study.

"From our point of view, it's just baffling," says McNeill.

"We don't know why it was OK for him to be a resident of the United States for several years as a graduate student, then after he turned out to be a crowning success as a graduate student, he was no longer suitable for residence in the United States.

"The logic of this, I think it's fair to say, escapes everyone at Georgetown."

Ari's case doesn't make much sense to UNL's immigration expert, either.

"I have no idea," says Levitov. "I cannot suspect that because you write about indigenous peoples, you are a terrorist."

Reach Matthew Hansen at 473-7245 or mhansen@journalstar.com.