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SOUTH KOREANS FEEL BETRAYED AFTER TRUMP'S IMMIGRATION STRIKE DETAINS HUNDREDS OF WORKERS AT A GEORGIA PLANT

Posted by Reporter | Sep 9, 2025



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South Korea's foreign minister departed for the U.S. on September 8 to finalize steps for the return of several hundred South Korean workers detained on September 4 in a massive immigration raid in Georgia, as the incident caused confusion, shock, and a sense of betrayal among many in the U.S.-allied nation.

A lawyer for several workers detained at a Hyundai factory in Georgia says many of the South Koreans rounded up in the immigration raid are engineers and equipment installers brought in for the highly specialized work of getting an electric battery plant online.

Atlanta immigration attorney Charles Kuck, who represents four of the detained South Korean nationals, said on September 8 that many were doing work that is authorized under the B-1 business visitor visa program. They had planned to be in the U.S. for just a couple of weeks and "never longer than 75 days," he said.

"The vast majority of the individuals that were detained by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement that were South Korean were either there as engineers or were involved in after-sales service and installation," Kuck said.

The raid on September 4 at the battery factory under construction at Hyundai's sprawling auto plant west of Savannah resulted in the detainment of 475 workers, more than 300 of them South Koreans. Some were shown being shackled with chains around their hands, ankles, and waists in a video released by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

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President Donald Trump said the workers “were here illegally,” and that instead, the U.S. needs to arrange with other countries to have their experts train U.S. citizens to do specialized work such as battery and computer manufacturing.

But immigration lawyer Kuck said no company in the U.S. makes the machines that are used in the Georgia battery plant, so they had to come from abroad to install or repair equipment on-site — work that would take about three to five years to train someone in the U.S. to do, he said.

“This is not something new,” Kuck said. “We’ve been doing this forever, and we do it — when we ship things abroad, we send our folks there to take care of it.”

THE JAPANESE AND GERMANS DID IT, TOO, CREATING U.S. JOBS

While neither government has revealed details about all the workers’ visas, it’s not unusual for foreign companies to save time and money by sending workers from abroad to set up U.S. factories, and then train U.S. workers, said Rosemary Coates, executive director of the Reshoring Institute, a nonprofit that encourages U.S. manufacturing.

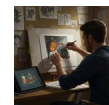
“We saw the same thing happening in the ’80s with Japanese carmakers setting up U.S. factories, and in the ’90s with German carmakers,” she said.

A B-1 visitor for business visa allows foreign workers to stay for up to six months, getting reimbursed for expenses while collecting a paycheck back home. There are limits — for example, they can supervise construction projects but can’t build anything themselves — but if it’s spelled out in a contract, they can install equipment, Los Angeles immigration lawyer Angelo Paparelli said.

Also, South Korea is one of 41 countries whose citizens can use the U.S. Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA), which provides a visa waiver if they can provide “a legitimate reason” for their visit, and this basically gives them B-1 visa status for up to 90 days, said immigration attorney Rita Sostrin in Los Angeles.



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RIGHTS ADVOCATES CALL FOR WORKERS' RELEASE IN GEORGIA

Advocates called for the detained workers to be released during a news conference on September 8 at a church in Savannah, about 25 miles east of the site where Hyundai began producing electric vehicles a year ago.

They included Sarah Park, president of the Korean American Coalition of Atlanta, who also said many of the detained South Korean workers had special skills needed to get the battery plant running.

Daniela Rodriguez, executive director of Migrant Equity Southeast, said immigrants from Mexico, Guatemala, Colombia, Chile, Ecuador, and Venezuela also were detained. She said the group's Savannah office has been flooded with calls from family members of workers who they can't reach and presume are detained.

Even some workers who weren't detained feel unsafe about returning to their jobs at the site, she said.

Workers described seeing armed agents and military-style vehicles during the raid, Rodriguez said, while drones and helicopters hovered overhead. She said one woman who had a work permit and wasn't detained told her: "We felt like we were being followed as animals, like they were hunting for us."

SOUTH KOREAN POLITICAL COMMUNITY ROILED BY THE U.S. RAID

Appearing at a legislative hearing before his departure, Foreign Minister Cho Hyun called the raid "a very serious matter" that he hadn't anticipated at all, as many lawmakers lamented the American operation.

"If U.S. authorities detain hundreds of Koreans in this manner, almost like a military operation, how can South Korean companies investing in the U.S. continue to invest properly in the future?" said Cho Jeongsik, a lawmaker from the liberal governing Democratic Party.



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Another lawmaker, Kim Gi-hyeon from the conservative opposition People Power Party, said the “unacceptable” raid dealt South Korea a “severe blow that will be difficult to heal.”

Some lawmakers even called for the government to retaliate by investigating Americans who are alleged to work illegally in South Korea.

Seoul has expressed regret over the raid, but experts say it won’t likely take any major tit-for-tat measures given the country’s security dependence on the U.S. in deterring potential North Korean aggressions and other spheres of cooperation between the two countries, including business ties.

MANY SOUTH KOREANS ARE STUNNED BY THE U.S. RAID

The Georgia operation was the latest in a series of workplace raids performed as part of the Trump administration’s mass deportation agenda, but it was Homeland Security Investigation’s largest enforcement operation on a single site. Many observers note that the state of Georgia is a symbol of the economic cooperation between the two countries since many large South Korean businesses operate factories and plan future investments there.

In South Korea, many remain stunned at the raid that came after the country in late July promised to pour hundreds of billions of dollars into U.S. investments as part of a tariff deal. Trump and South Korean President Lee Jae Myung also held their first summit meeting in Washington on Aug. 25.

“The way that Trump is pressuring the Korean government and inflicting damages on its people is very rough and unilateral,” said Kim Taewoo, former head of Seoul’s Korea Institute for National Unification. “Can this be forgotten easily in South Korea? In a long-term perspective, it won’t be good for U.S. national interests as well.”

In an editorial on September 8, South Korea’s biggest newspaper, Chosun Ilbo, wrote that “Fundamental doubts emerge: What does

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Paik Wooyeal, a professor at Seoul's Yonsei University, viewed the raid as a collision between a U.S. goal of restoring manufacturing with foreign investments, and a lack of visa and immigration systems that could support such an attempt.

Paik said that South Korean companies operating in the U.S. will likely suffer "a great confusion" as they would be forced to bring their workers back home to resolve visa issues. Such developments would also undermine U.S. interests, but Trump won't likely make any concessions anytime soon, Paik said.

SOUTH KOREANS QUESTION U.S. VISA SYSTEM

Steven Schrank, the lead Georgia agent of Homeland Security Investigations, said on September 5 that some of the detained workers had illegally crossed the U.S. border, while others had entered the country legally but had expired visas or had entered on a visa waiver that prohibited them from working.

But South Korean officials and experts have expressed frustration over what they call the United States' strict limits on H-1B or H-2B visas for high-skilled foreign workers to protect its domestic workforce, and its inaction on Seoul's calls to expand work visas for skilled South Korean nationals. As a result, South Korean companies have been relying on short-term visitor visas or the Electronic System for Travel Authorization to send workers needed to launch manufacturing facilities or handle other setup tasks.

"The incident will inevitably exacerbate shortages of skilled workers with legal work authorization and create pressure for increases in labor costs, potentially disrupting operations and rising costs across major business projects in the United States," South Korea's Eugene Investment and Securities said in a report on September 8.

Daishin Securities in a report said the Georgia raid could delay operations at the targeted battery plant, which was slated to begin production early next year, potentially affecting Hyundai's EV business in America.



During the legislative hearing, Cho, the foreign minister, told lawmakers that the U.S. had “not responded adequately” to South Korea’s requests to expand visas for its workers, and that Seoul plans to use the Georgia raid as an opportunity to move related negotiations forward.

Cho said that some of the people detained in Georgia may need to return to the site to complete work at the factory, and that South Korean officials are negotiating with American authorities to ensure that those detained can reenter the United States.

“I will clearly point out to them that a delay in (the factory’s) completion would also cause significant losses for the United States,” Cho said.



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