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## Arrests worry Barcelona's Pakistanis

By Eva Millet  
BBC News, Barcelona

**The arrests last weekend of 12 Pakistanis and two Indians in the Spanish city of Barcelona have sparked a mixture of disbelief, indignation and sadness among the estimated 25,000 Pakistanis living in the city.**

Police found what they said was bomb-related material in a number of raids and that the operation was aimed at breaking up an Islamist terror network.

About 10,000 of Barcelona's Pakistani community are concentrated in the barrio of El Raval, in the heart of the old city. It has the highest levels of immigration and poverty in the Barcelona, the capital of Catalonia.

And it was in the narrow, permanently busy streets of El Raval that the police raids took place.

Since 2003 more than 70 people, including a number of Pakistanis, have been arrested in Catalonia suspected of Islamist militant links.

However, the authorities insist that this part of Spain is not a terrorism hotbed.

The Pakistani community here is worried that this is a message that is not getting through.

### 'Hard workers'

Saturday's arrests "are like a bomb for the image of the Pakistani community here," says Javed Ilyas, president of the Association of Workers from Pakistan.

He is particularly upset that police raided a mosque at night, where some of the detained were arrested. He knows some of the people now in police custody. "One was very happy, because his wife was coming from Pakistan. How can you plan to make bombs while you are waiting for your wife?" he asks.

Mr Ilyas insists that the Pakistanis living in Barcelona are "hard workers, peaceful, mind their own business and abide by Spanish law. If a few are criminals that doesn't mean we all are the same."

Mailik Imran, from Islamabad, owns a shop in the street where most of the raids took place.

He has been living in Barcelona for five years and is sceptical about the bomb-related material the police put on display. "I just see two small batteries and some cables... What can you do with that?"

"I think that the upcoming Spanish elections have something to do with all this," Mr Imran says.

Nadeem Ayub lives in the same street. His father was one of those arrested. "He has been living in Spain for 30 years, everyone knows him in the neighbourhood. Now everyone knows he is under arrest even though he is not guilty," Mr Ayub told Barcelona's El Periodico newspaper.

### **'Taken over'**

In the Tariq bin Ziyad mosque, one of the two that were searched by the police, the doors are open for prayer. Al-Maruf, the Urdu-speaking imam was also arrested during the raids. The Arabic-speaking imam, who is from Morocco, assured the BBC that they have nothing to do with terrorism.

Among the non-Pakistani community in El Raval, feelings about the immigrant community are mixed.

A Catalan shopkeeper, who did not want to be named, is critical of the way the Pakistani community has become so numerous. "The authorities haven't controlled how the Pakistanis and the Muslims have been taken over the neighbourhood."

But a manager of a local hotel describes the Pakistanis as "people who work hard and do not cause problems".

Pakistani immigration to Spain started in the 1970s, but it was in the 1990s when it took off.

In 2000, the Pakistani community in Barcelona was very active in the protest lock-ins in several churches, demanding to be given legal status.

Nowadays, according to Javed Ilyas, only 5% of Pakistanis in the city are illegal immigrants.

### **Sources of work**

About 90% of the community are men, running a range of different businesses.

Grocery shops, restaurants, butchers and internet cafes have mushroomed in El Raval and its surroundings.

Construction and agriculture are also important sources of employment for a community that mainly comes from the Pakistan's Punjab province and Kashmir.

Since the al-Qaeda attacks in Madrid in March 2003, Pakistanis have been active in anti-terrorism demonstrations.

However, despite the protests of the majority, Spanish intelligence sources say that young Pakistanis living in Spain are the targets for at least one extremist group allied to Al-Qaeda seeking recruits.

Story from BBC NEWS:

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