Alabama Student Fears ICE Targeting

By Madison Chandler

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents targeting international students who have visas has become a significant concern in the international community. President Donald Trump's crackdown on immigration has caused fear for students even when they're here legally and have no criminal record. *The Acta Diurna* interviewed a Colombian graduate student in Alabama who has concerns about ICE's methods. The student wished to remain anonymous for fear of ending up in a detention center.

The Acta Diurna: **When did you first start feeling afraid of ICE?**

Student: "I think from what I have seen I've been afraid ever since 2016. This has been an ongoing issue. This is not new, although this is more rampant and more extreme than it was in 2016 … When they started partnering with local police enforcement, that's when I knew it was going to become a real issue, because it's not just policing, like regular policing anymore. You don't know whether it's an actual police officer or an ICE agent, because they are partners."



Are there places you avoid now because of your fear of ICE?

Student: "Yes. I try not to because I still have to live my day-to-day life, but I avoid certain grocery stores ... [And] I am keeping tabs online – if people say that ICE is in a certain area, I try not to go there. For example, I saw that [ICE] was in Homewood recently, so I tried not to go there. Also, foreign grocery stores like Mi Pueblo or everything around the Lakeshore area has been targeted as well. So, I try to avoid it whenever possible. I sometimes go because there are lots of Walmarts there and I have to still buy my groceries. But if there is a lot of presence of ICE agents in a certain place, I just avoid it. If I don't have to go, I won't."

Do you avoid speaking your native language out in public?

Student: "See … I … This is kind of tricky because I personally like speaking my native language, especially with my partner or when I am talking with my mom over the phone and I … Those are like the two people I speak Spanish with most of the time. So, if I avoid it, I just basically need to stop communicating with them and that's not something that I want. I try to keep it private most of the time, whenever I am at home or whenever I'm within a close environment or when I'm with people that know me already. When I came here a couple months ago, I was much more confident with speaking Spanish out in the open, but right now I feel kind of iffy about it.

So, I'm still trying to navigate that as I go. Especially if I catch people looking at me directly, when I'm on the phone, I try to avoid it, or like pick another time to call my mom or my relatives. So it's been tough."

Do you think your school prioritizes the safety of international students?

Student: "No, I don't think so. I'm very lucky to be at a school that is very diverse, so I'm not alone in feeling this way, which is good, but there aren't policies in place or solidarity. As far as faculty goes, I feel like I'm pretty much alone in the fact that if something happens to me, I just have my friends to help me out and not the university or faculty that are supposed to take care of me in that sense."

Since Trump was appointed to office, there has been a "brain drain" in the US – academics or people who specialize in certain fields are leaving the United States. Since you are pursuing higher education in the United States, do you plan on staying or leaving?

Student: "That's a really good question actually. I want to remain optimistic in the fact that I can stay. But again, you never know, but for now I just want to live my day-to-day life. I feel like that whether I stay or not will be something to worry about in the future. For now, I just want to keep my day-to-day life as normal as possible, and if something happens and that means I can't stay, I just have the privilege and the luxury to have a safety net back home and go back home … my actual plan was to stay, because my field is pretty much better here in the US, as opposed to back home, but you know, it's not worth the risk if things keep getting this way."

You said the country you come from has faced political and civil unrest. Do you see the United States headed in that direction, or maybe getting involved in your country?

Student: "Yeah, especially because of the neighboring country Venezuela – you know what happened there. That was really scary to see. That means that Trump and political elites are making decisions that may affect me even if I go back home. There's a lot of uncertainty in times like this, although I do think that there's a really high chance that my country is next. I don't think there's a doubt in my mind, unfortunately."

How is ICE portrayed in Colombian news and media? How is the ICE presence in the US portrayed in Spanish news?

Student: "I feel like it gives a really accurate representation because the communities that are being affected the most are from South America. There's a lot of solidarity in the way that this is portrayed in the media, and you can see there's no good way about talking about ICE. In my opinion, there's just not, and that's how I see things reflected back home or whenever my mom is watching the news or sending me news articles. All that we see is a lot of commotion and a lot of sadness that this is happening here and a lot of … being enraged that this has come to a point that this is happening in the US, especially for us as a part of the Latin community."

If you could say something directly to policy makers and school administrators, what would it be?

Student: "To have solidarity … There is a lot of division in the US right now and there isn't a lot of solidarity from white policy makers, black policy makers, Asian policy makers … That's really reflected in how they make policy recently. I just want them to have solidarity and empathy, even if it's not you or your relatives going through this. [That would] make change [to] ultimately benefit all of us."

Is there anything else you want to say, maybe something that I did not ask?

Student: "I mean not that you didn't ask but we, I just … even though we are afraid, I believe that we still have to make the most of things. I came all the way over here having the paperwork being done to get a student visa. [Getting a student visa] isn't quick, isn't easy, so I'm trying to make the most out of my time and my efforts to come all the way here. I'm sure a lot of people feel that way, so even though we are afraid and everything seems like it's going into the wrong and worst direction possible, I believe there's still hope and I believe we can end this on a good note."