

Asian Democrats hold show of strength

SAM RAO

San Jose, Calif

A FIRST of its kind national-level Political Leadership Summit meeting catering exclusively to Asian-American and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) loyal to the Democratic Party was held at the Marriot Hotel in San Jose in the first weekend of April.

The DNC-AAPI Leadership summit was attended by a capacity crowd of 400 activists, party workers and elected officials of Asian-American heritage.

One of the results of the weekend gathering and feedback was a vow by the DNC leadership to establish a mentor network for Asian-American Democrats in politics.

Parag Mehta, a staff member at DNC (Democratic National Committee) and one of the organizers of the summit said "We had to cut off the registration at 400 people, which tells us (DNC) how popular and much needed such a conference was."

The cut off number perhaps explained the absence of some already elected Indian-American Democrats and a lack of local bay area Indian-American Democrat leaders, although quite a few young, emerging South Asian leaders attended the conference. The defined goal of the summit was "to reconnect the DNC with our grassroots."

The historic meeting came about after the DNC recognizing, perhaps belatedly, the growing numbers and clout of Asian Americans in their rank and file, decided to host this historic meeting. The meeting was brought to San Jose due to the efforts of Bay Area Congressman Mike Honda, and given shape under the leadership of current party



Indian Americans congregate at the Democrat Leadership Summit for Asians in San Jose

Chairman Howard Dean.

At the summit, in sessions that were closed to the press, attendees discussed fundraising, campaign tactics, electronic electioneering, voter outreach and education for the upcoming election cycle.

Among the Indian-Americans who attended included Bay area venture capitalist Kamil Hasan, who was appointed as a DNC member-at-large recently. Hasan said "I thought the meeting was an important milestone. Indo-Americans have started to get some recognition in the political world because of our intellectual and financial resources and our ability to raise significant funds for political candidates. But, we are too small in numbers. Therefore, to develop our political clout, we need to develop

coalitions with other communities."

Ro Khanna, who ran unsuccessfully for Congress from San Mateo in 2004, was one of the panelists at the summit. Khanna has also been appointed by House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D) to chair the Indo-American Council for Democrats in Congress. Khanna said "Indian-Americans in the next decade are going to be a major factor in the Democratic Party."

Some grassroots activists like New Jersey based Sunil Garg said, "We are glad the Democrat party leaders are listening to our issues, promoting our people and not just tapping us for campaign contributions," something about which many Indian-Americans have complained in the past, referring to both political parties and their respective

candidates, who mainly seemed to be interested in hosting fundraisers in the Indian-American community.

Veteran Congressman Mike Honda, the first elected official to be included the DNC and also the first vice chair of the DNC, has long espoused connecting with grassroots activists. Chairman Dean's priorities include giving the Democratic party a new vigor, especially after the debacle at the polls in past two elections. Dr. Dean outlined the theme of the summit as "it's not enough to be invited to the banquet (but) we want Asian-Americans to be on the ticket (ballot) as well."

Many animated discussions during the conclave centered around the pending Immigration bill in the Senate and Congress, which touches the entire immigrant Asian-Ameri-

can community deeply.

Dean gave a rousing speech on Saturday, in full campaign mode, urging his attendees to knock on doors, make personal connections and also strongly urging the under-represented Asian-American community to run for public office. Almost all attendees polled said that the Immigration bill and the scape-goating of immigrants in general were their top priorities for activism. The meeting of more than 400 elected officials and party activists comes at a crucial time in election cycle and when important policy changes are imminent in the US.

Although traditionally Asian-Americans have backed Democrats, the Republican Party has also started to make inroads in the community. The Democrats hope that the debate over immigration could spur new Asian-American support, especially bills like the one on immigration which Republican party members have introduced which would make even humanitarian and charitable aid-givers to be viewed as potential felons, aside from designating all illegal immigrants men, women and children as felons.

"In an elections, its values that are important nowadays, no longer is ethnicity a driving force to get elected," Dean said, citing the example of a recently elected Council member in a major city, Boston. Asian American Sam Yoon won in the area where voters were predominantly of Irish-descent. Dean also stated that the vast majority of Asian-American elected officials, most of whom serve in local positions, were Democrats while in Congress, six of the seven members of Asian descent were Democrats and in the California Legislature, the count was six out of nine.

Immigration Bill: Back to square one

SUJEET RAJAN

New York

IT came that close.

The Senate reached a consensus on a bill for a comprehensive immigration reform that would have put a majority of the about 12 million illegal immigrants in the US on the road to citizenship and toughen border enforcement last week, on the last day before a two-week Spring recess, when last minute hurdles came up in the form of floor procedures and it all evaporated. Now, it's back to Square One: to the Senate Judiciary Committee for more deliberations without a date for Senate action in sight.

The rallies have started with gusto once more across the country. It is going to be a long two weeks of waiting for the illegal immigrant community.

Under the nearly passed bill, sponsored by Senators Chuck Hagel of Nebraska and Mel Martinez of Florida, some 7.5 million illegal immigrants who have been in the country more than five years would have been put on the road to citizenship, without leaving

the shores of the US if they so wished, on condition of not having been unemployed for a stipulated time, pass background checks, pay fines and back taxes, learn English and meet other requirements.

Some three million illegal immigrants, who arrived less than five years ago but before January 2004, would have to leave the country but could turn around immediately and be processed at a land port of entry. Those in this category would have their green card applications placed ahead of future migrants who enter through a temporary worker program. They would have got citizenship about 14 years after the program is launched.

Under the stalled bill, about 1.5 million illegal immigrants who entered the country after January 2004 would have been forced to return home within three years. They could then apply for temporary worker visas without a promise of green cards or citizenship.

According to reports, part of the reason the Senate negotiations broke down is that the bill's sponsors, especially the Democ-

rats, were looking for guarantees that their bill would serve as the framework for the final version. Conservative House leaders have insisted that Congress first approve a border enforcement bill before helping illegal immigrants.

Now, even if the Senate compromise can be salvaged, it still would have to be reconciled with a House bill passed last December, which focused on border security and some draconian penalties against illegal immigrants and the firms that hire them.

Some Indian American immigrant advocates however cautioned against the compromise eked out by Hagel and Martinez, saying the bill held several provisions which they strongly opposed.

"For months, immigrant communities have been railing against HR 4437, the immigration bill passed by the House of Representatives," said Benita Jain, Staff Attorney, NYSDA Immigrant Defense Project. "Every piece of legislation on the table in the Senate contains many of the same provisions that would expand the detention and deportation system. Like the Specter and Frist

bills, the Hagel-Martinez bill subjects green card holders to increased detention and deportation and undermines the goals of guest worker and 'legalization' programs by ensuring that many people would be ineligible for such programs."

Subhash Kateel of Families for Freedom, a multi-ethnic network of immigrants and their families facing deportation, said the bills proposed by Senator Arlen Specter, Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, and the new failed proposal by Senators Hagel and Martinez, will expand offenses that would lead to mandatory deportation of green card-holders and others to additional minor offenses like some drunk driving offenses (even misdemeanors) or providing assistance to undocumented employees, family, and neighbors.

A judge has no discretion to take into account whether a person with such offenses has longtime ties to the US, kids or a spouse who is a US citizen, has changed her life around, or other equities, Kateel said.

Jain and Kateel say they want to cut down provisions that would stand in the way of legitimate claims for immigration and want to push changes when it again comes up for deliberations before the Senate Judiciary Committee.

