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South Koreans feel betrayed by workforce detentions at Georgia Hyundai plant

By [The Associated Press](#)

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This image from video provided by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement via DVIDS shows a person being handcuffed at the Hyundai Motor Group's electric vehicle plant, Thursday, Sept. 4, 2025, in Ellabell, Ga. (Corey Bullard/U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement via AP)

SAVANNAH, Ga. (AP) — 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, told The Associated Press on Monday 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 Thursday 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 them South Koreans. Some were shown being shackled with chains around their hands, ankles and waists in video released by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

South Korea expects to bring its detainees home

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South Korea’s foreign minister was flying to the U.S. on Monday to secure his citizens' return on a charter flight to South Korea, where many people have expressed confusion, shock and a sense of betrayal.

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 US 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.

Rights advocates call for workers' release in Georgia

Advocates called for the detained workers to be released during a news conference Monday 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.”

Labor leader accuses Hyundai of abusing work rules

A Savannah labor union leader said local unions have complained that Hyundai and its contractors were improperly using South Korean workers for basic construction that falls outside the visa waiver rules.

Christi Hulme, president of the Savannah Regional Central Labor Council, said unions that are part of her council believe Korean workers have been pouring cement, erecting steel, performing carpentry and fitting pipes.

“Basically our labor was being given to illegal immigrants,” Hulme said.

Spokespersons for Hyundai's Georgia EV factory and the adjacent battery plant did not immediately reply to an email message seeking comment.

South Korean politicians roiled

Appearing before his departure at a legislative hearing where many lawmakers lamented the American operation, Foreign Minister Cho Hyun called the raid by South Korea's close ally “a very serious matter.”

“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.

Some lawmakers called for retaliatory investigations of Americans who allegedly work illegally in South Korea.

Experts say the raid won't likely prompt any major tit-for-tat measures given how much the country depends on the U.S. for security in deterring potential North Korean aggression and other spheres of cooperation, including business ties.

Many South Koreans are stunned

This was the Homeland Security agency's largest workplace raid yet as it pursues its mass deportation agenda, and it targeted Georgia — a symbol of bilateral cooperation where many large South Korean businesses operate and plan future investments. Only weeks ago, South Korea promised hundreds of billions in U.S. investments to reach a tariff deal. Trump and South Korean President Lee Jae Myung held their first summit 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.”

Brumback reported from Atlanta and Hyung-Jin Kim reported from Seoul, South Korea. Associated Press journalists Kim Tong-Hyung in Seoul, Jeff Amy in Atlanta and Paul Wiseman in Washington, D.C., also contributed.

Russ Bynum, Kate Brumback And Hyung-jin Kim, The Associated Press

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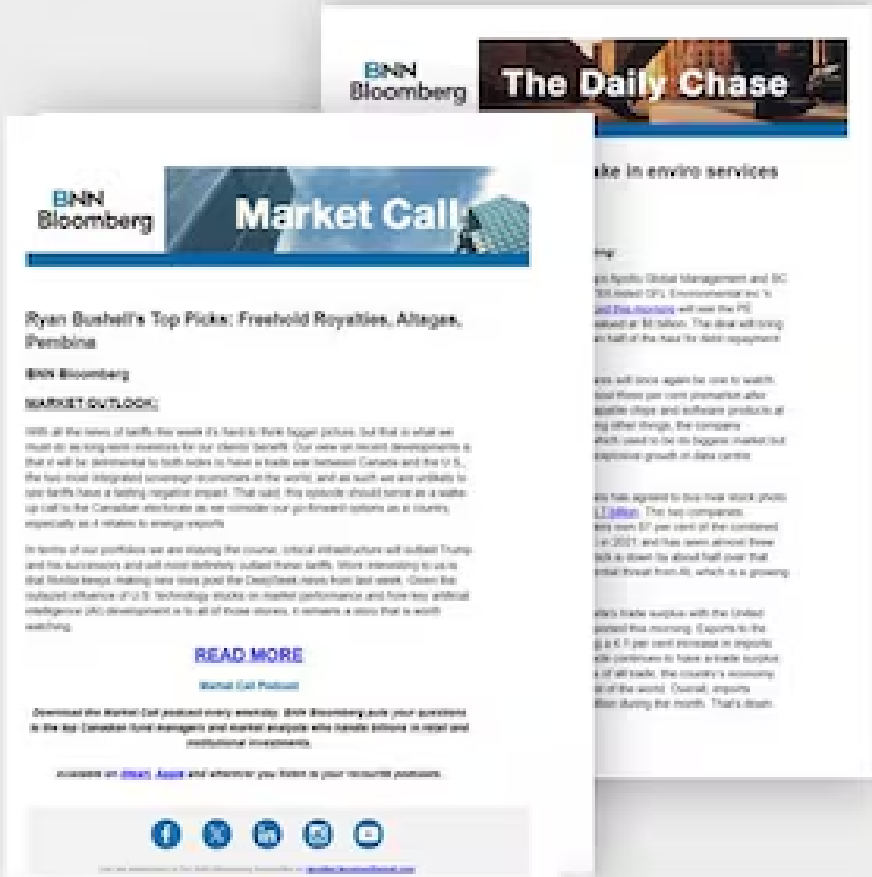
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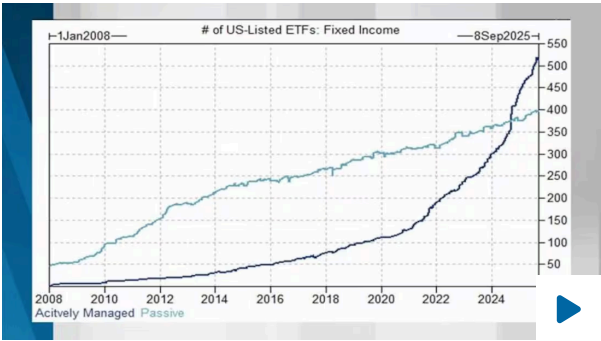
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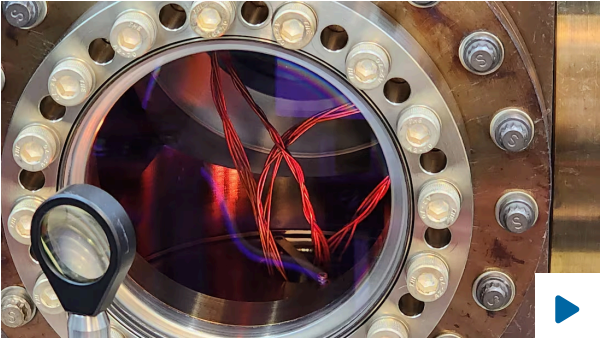
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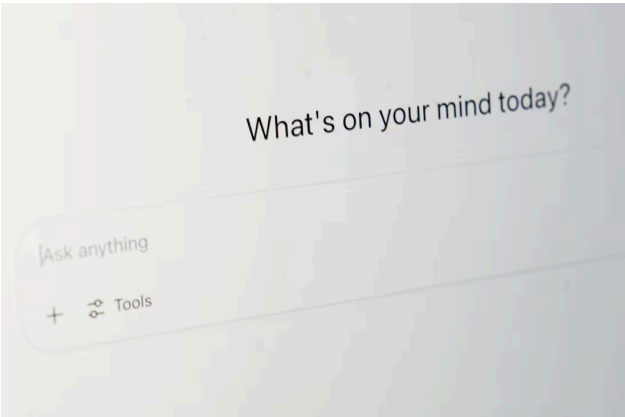
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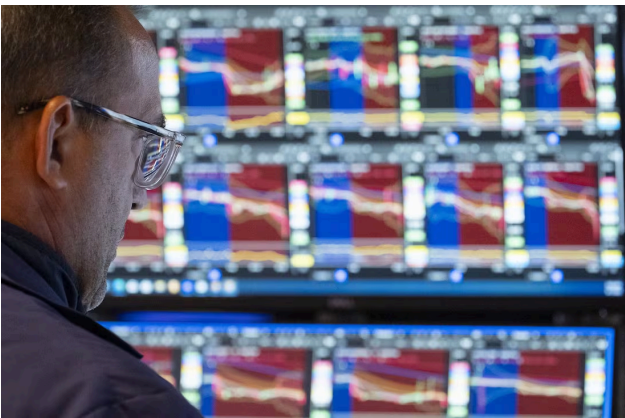
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