

THE NEW YORK TIMES

December 13, 2006

U.S. Raids 6 Meat Plants in ID Case

By JULIA PRESTON

In simultaneous dawn raids, federal immigration agents swept into six Swift & Company meatpacking plants in six states yesterday, rounding up hundreds of immigrant workers in what the agents described as a vast criminal investigation of identity theft.

More than 1,000 agents from Immigration and Customs Enforcement appeared at 6 a.m. at the Swift plants with warrants to search for illegal immigrants. Inside, agents separated American citizens from immigrants, interviewing all the foreign workers and taking hundreds away in buses to immigration detention centers.

In a new enforcement tactic, federal officials said they planned to bring criminal charges against some of the immigrants accused of using stolen identities. They said the raids were tied to complaints from United States citizens who discovered that their names were being used by Swift plant workers.

“There are several hundred Americans who were victimized,” said Marc Raimondi, a spokesman for the immigration agency, known as I.C.E.

Other immigrants who are found to be living illegally in the United States will be deported, Mr. Raimondi said.

The raids brought protests from Swift, the only business singled out, and from the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union, which organizes employees at five of the six plants.

Sam Rovit, chief executive of Swift, said the company learned of the I.C.E. investigation in March, but had been “rebuffed repeatedly” when it offered to cooperate. Mr. Rovit said the company had participated since 1997 in a federal program known as Basic Pilot, which allows employers to use a federal database to verify documents presented by job-seekers.

“We have complied with every law that is out there on the books,” Mr. Rovit said in an interview.

The six plants employ more than 10,000 people, Swift executives said.

Mr. Rovit said the company had been careful to avoid inquiring too deeply into backgrounds of job applicants. He said the Justice Department sued Swift in 2001 charging that it discriminated against immigrant workers. The case was settled for \$200,000, a company statement said.

Illegal immigrants frequently use false Social Security cards or residency documents known as green cards when they apply for jobs. I.C.E. officials said the operation focused on immigrants who had obtained documents with identity information corresponding to that of United States citizens, in some cases by buying them from underground organizations that traffic in false documents.

Officials at the union called the operation a “wholesale roundup” and said they would seek injunctions on behalf of the detained workers.

“Worksite raids are not an effective form of immigration reform,” said Jill Cashen, a spokeswoman for the union. “They terrorize workers and destroy families.”

The immigration agency raided plants in Hyrum, Utah; Greeley, Colo.; Cactus, Tex.; Grand Island, Neb.; Marshalltown, Iowa; and Worthington, Minn.