

Federal agents arrest illegal immigrants leaving U.S.

At random times in San Diego near the border, vehicles are searched. Most detainees without criminal records or numerous immigration violations are released in a few hours, officials say.

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SAN DIEGO — U.S. border authorities no longer apprehend illegal immigrants only as they enter the country. Now they're catching them on the way out.

At random times near the Tijuana-San Diego border, U.S. Customs and Border Protection officers have been setting up checkpoints, boarding buses destined for Mexico and pulling off people who don't have proper documentation.

The operation appears to be an expansion of a broader federal crackdown targeting illegal immigrants in jails, airports and workplaces across the country.

The checkpoints, which are not announced in advance, are set up on southbound Interstate 5 about 100 yards north of the border. Vehicles in all lanes must stop.

Vincent Bond, an agency spokesman, said departing immigrants are fair targets.

"If our officers come upon people who are here illegally . . . regardless of whether they're leaving the country, we detain them, make a record of the fact they were here illegally and return them to Mexico," Bond said.

Immigrant rights groups and other critics say the crackdown is a sad reflection of growing anti-immigrant sentiment in the country.

"The policies of the Bush administration are designed to make life so difficult for immigrants in the U.S. illegally that they're forced to leave. . . . Now they're arresting people who they are actually driving out of the country. . . . Unbelievable," said Frank Sharry, executive director of America's Voice, a Washington-based immigration reform group.

But some GOP politicians and anti-illegal immigration organizations praise federal authorities for widening their enforcement efforts. A spokesman for Rep. Duncan Hunter (R-El Cajon) said agents were simply doing their job.

"Whether people are coming or going . . . checkpoints are just another line of defense that targets illegal behavior," Joe Kasper said.

Customs and Border Protection, which typically provides detailed statistics on apprehensions, would not disclose details of the checkpoint operation. Nor would they say how long it has been underway.

The checkpoints have been randomly deployed since the Sept. 11 attacks, with inspectors typically looking for fugitives, stolen vehicles, weapons, drugs and other contraband.

Illegal immigrants became targets for arrest at the checkpoints only a few months ago, according to immigrant rights groups and human rights organizations in Mexico. It is unclear how frequently the checkpoints have been set up.

But Enrique Morones, president of the Border Angels, a San Diego-based group, said he believes that hundreds of immigrants have been arrested since the crackdown began.

Over a half-hour period April 30, agents appeared to be pulling over every bus and van heading for the border. But any vehicle, including cars, that agents deem suspicious may be stopped and searched.

Inspectors detained five young men from one bus traveling from Los Angeles to Puebla, a city southeast of Mexico City. After the inspectors made their apprehensions, only two passengers remained onboard.

"*Pobrecitos* (poor people)," said Lily Lujan, who watched the immigrants being arrested as she walked to the border crossing. "They were almost home. If they're already leaving the country, what's the problem?"

Federal agents say the checkpoints are a productive way to stop dangerous criminals, drug shipments and money launderers.

The illegal immigrants they apprehend are typically turned over to the U.S. Border Patrol for processing. Unless they have serious criminal records or numerous immigration violations, most are returned to Mexico within a few hours, the agents say.

Wayne Cornelius, director of the Center of Comparative Immigration Studies at UC San Diego, said he was not aware of similar crackdowns in the past. The checkpoints make sense for intercepting contraband, but targeting illegal immigrants voluntarily leaving the country is a "bizarre" way of handling the illegal immigration question, he said.

Other critics call it an enormous waste of resources and say it could be counterproductive and discourage immigrants from going home.

"There are people that want to go back, and even though they haven't done anything

wrong, they might be intimidated from leaving," said Morones of the Border Angels. "It makes no sense."

But groups that fight illegal immigration praise federal authorities for showing more willingness to enforce existing immigration laws aggressively. Focusing on the criminality of people entering the country is only part of the job of border agencies, they say.

Rick Oltman, spokesman for Californians for Population Stabilization, said he hoped that the crackdown on departing illegal immigrants would be expanded to other exit points across the country.

He said apprehended immigrants who returned home to Mexico would become "ambassadors of enforcement" and might help deter illegal immigration.

"Each one of these people will then report increased enforcement to family and friends when they do get home, and that will give them second thoughts about sneaking back into the U.S.," he said.