

ICE steps up enforcement at work sites

Laborers, bosses put on edge, while skeptics question whether raids are a political ploy
April 23, 2007

By MICHELLE MITTELSTADT
Houston Chronicle

WASHINGTON — Federal agents have been swooping into workplaces with increasing frequency, snatching up illegal immigrants employed at construction sites, manufacturing plants and other businesses.

The government insists the raids, which have terrified immigrant communities and made employers nervous in Houston and elsewhere, are part of a broader enforcement strategy just now hitting its stride.

But it's no coincidence, skeptics on and off Capitol Hill contend, that the government has stepped up the enforcement tempo as the Bush administration tries to persuade a skittish Congress to give millions of illegal immigrants a path to legal status.

"It's a political attempt by the White House to seem credible on enforcement in order to get an amnesty passed," said Mark Krikorian, executive director of the Center for Immigration Studies, which favors reduced immigration. "It's purely a political ploy. That having been said, it's real enforcement."

A spokesman for Immigration and Customs Enforcement, the Department of Homeland Security arm responsible for immigration enforcement inside the U.S, denies that politics is involved.

ICE's higher apprehension statistics speak for themselves, said spokesman Marc Raimondi. "We have consistently ratcheted up our enforcement actions since we were created four years ago," he said.

Accused of essentially ignoring work-site enforcement during the early years of the Bush administration, immigration authorities served notice of a new era in April 2005 with a multistate raid on the operations of a Houston pallet services company.

ICE nabbed nearly 1,200 illegal immigrants working for IFCO Systems and brought charges against seven current and former managers, accusing them of conspiring to harbor illegal immigrants.

In December, ICE turned its sights on Swift meat processing plants in Texas and five other states, arresting nearly 1,300 illegal workers. In the months since, agents conducted high-profile raids in Massachusetts, Illinois and Maryland. And seven janitorial workers in Houston were apprehended in February during a raid of national chain restaurants in 41 cities that netted 220 illegal immigrants.

Stepped-up pace

During the first six months of the fiscal year that began Oct. 1, the agency apprehended 2,763 illegal immigrants in work-site operations, putting it on pace to significantly top the 3,667 apprehensions made for all of fiscal 2006.

And ICE increasingly is bringing criminal charges in work-site investigations, hoping to go after those who knowingly hire illegal immigrants. Criminal charges have been filed this year against 527 people, compared with 718 for all of fiscal 2006 and just 25 in fiscal 2002.

Local concerns

Though Houston has been no hotbed for recent work-site investigations, the fear of raids nonetheless is being felt both by employers and immigrants, local immigration attorneys and activists say.

"It certainly is the message from these other raids that people in Houston need to be on guard," said immigration attorney Gordon Quan, a former Houston councilman.

Quan said a business client recently asked for his cell phone number "so I'd be available 24 hours a day if something were to happen."

"He was just scared something might happen," Quan said.

The immigrant community is deeply worried, said Wafa Abdin, supervising attorney at Cabrini Center for Immigrant Legal Assistance at Catholic Charities of Houston.

"We know there is a real fear in the community about it," she said. "Everybody is very apprehensive about (raids) starting."

Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas, said the splashy ICE actions speak to one issue: a broken immigration system.

"I think this has focused a lot more people and the press on the problems of the status quo and why kicking the can down the road is not acceptable," said Cornyn, the top Republican on the Senate immigration subcommittee and a key player in immigration talks with the White House.

Seriousness doubted

But some in Congress fear the administration's enforcement focus may not last long.

"I've seen very little evidence that would convince me that the administration is truly serious about border security or workplace enforcement," said Rep. John Culberson, R-Houston, noting that in 2004 the administration went after only three employers for hiring illegal workers.

Culberson is still irate about an April 2004 town hall meeting in Houston at which a top immigration official assured immigrants that that his agents were not conducting work-site raids randomly.

Sen. Jon Kyl, an Arizona Republican being wooed by the White House to support its immigration plan, was positive about the enforcement push.

"It demonstrates a seriousness of purpose that is a precondition, I think, to us getting support for a bill," he said.

In Illinois, where a high-profile raid at a Beardstown pork plant this month netted 49 illegal sanitation workers, immigrant-rights groups are demanding a moratorium on work-site operations, which they deem inhumane and harmful when the illegal immigrants are separated from their U.S.-born children.