

Immigration agents arrest nearly 300 at Pilgrim's Pride plants

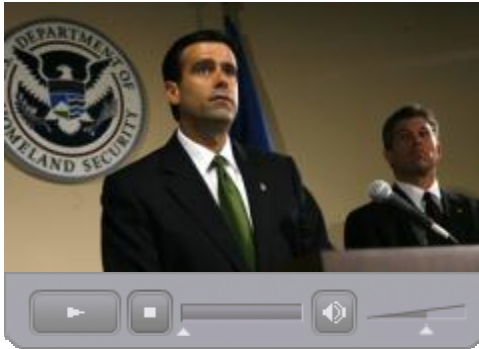
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By DIANNE SOLÍS and ALEJANDRO MARTÍNEZ /

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Federal immigration officials on Wednesday arrested more than 280 workers employed at Pilgrim's Pride poultry plants in five states, including Texas, on suspicion of committing identity theft. The crackdown is part of a widening criminal investigation involving workers at the world's largest poultry processor.

Video



Texas poultry plant workers arrested in immigration raid
04/16/08

This case is a good example of our efforts to prosecute identity theft that harms credit and the good name of U.S. citizens," said Julie Myers, assistant secretary for the U.S. Homeland Security Department, in a telephone interview from Washington, D.C.

More arrests could be made, federal officials said. A federal grand jury, convened in Tyler, issued an indictment for some of the arrests, and it was unsealed shortly before the operation began.

Forty-five workers were arrested at the plant or at workers' homes in Mount Pleasant, a community of roughly 15,000 surrounded by farm and cattle land about 115 miles east of Dallas.

Pilgrim's Pride wasn't charged.

"We have cooperated fully with the government," said Ray Atkinson, a Pilgrim's Pride spokesman, at corporate headquarters in Pittsburg, Texas.

Pilgrim's Pride also participates in a federal government program to voluntarily check Social Security numbers against workers' names in two government databases, Mr.

Atkinson said. The program is known as E-Verify. It has been criticized as error-prone and because it can't detect workers who are using authentic Social Security numbers connected to a U.S. citizen or a legal permanent resident.

"Unfortunately, it does not detect ID theft situations," Mr. Atkinson said of E-Verify.

Coordinated effort

Identity fraud is a felony under federal law, and a growing problem as federal immigration efforts have intensified and workers in the U.S. illegally have looked for ways to avoid detection. Some U.S. citizens, and legal residents, rent or share their Social Security numbers, making detection even more arduous.

On Wednesday morning in Mount Pleasant, at a trailer park full of low-income wage-earners, Filiberto Nava said he was worried for many workers. But Mr. Nava, a Pilgrim's night shift worker, said he would have no problem because he was in the U.S. legally. Agents knocked at doors, and "even went inside houses," Mr. Nava said in Spanish.

The government operation began at 5:30 a.m., in coordinated actions in Texas; Batesville, Ark.; Live Oak, Fla.; Moorefield, W.Va.; and Chattanooga, Tenn. About 100 arrests were made in West Virginia, and about another 100 arrests were made in Tennessee, said Ms. Myers of Homeland Security.

At a news conference, John Chakwin, Immigration and Customs Enforcement's special-agent-in-charge for investigations in North Texas, recounted the story of a woman in New York with a heart condition, whose medical care was snarled by health insurance inquiries about her identity. A worker at the Mount Pleasant plant had stolen her Social Security number, and as law enforcement officials moved in to investigate, Mr. Chakwin said, the worker fled the area.

"This shows how illegal immigration can affect the American public, people like you and me," Mr. Chakwin said.

Mr. Chakwin said ICE was coordinating with local social-service agencies to see if any of the detainees were sole providers for children.

Raids on the rise

The measures come after sharp criticism over the manner in which ICE conducted raids at Swift & Co. meat plants in December 2006, in Texas and other venues; and in March 2007, at the leather goods factory of Michael Bianco Inc., in New Bedford, Mass. In the New Bedford case, many of the detainees were taken to a South Texas detention center.

Unlike those arrests, it doesn't appear that federal agents secured doors and disrupted plant operations so that workers could be held until they proved their U.S. citizenship, legal residency or work authorization. In September, the federal government was sued by

the United Food and Commercial Workers Union in an effort to prevent mass detentions of all workers in such raids. All the plaintiffs in that case are in the U.S. legally, their attorney said at the time.

Olivia Cervantes, the wife of a worker detained on Wednesday, said her husband was in the U.S. legally and using a proper Social Security number. She said her husband, Jesús García, didn't resist arrest when officers showed him their warrant. "They took him out in handcuffs," she said. "He was calm because he knows he hasn't done anything wrong."

Ms. Cervantes said she was having difficulty locating her husband. Her father, Mariano Cervantes, a legal U.S. resident, called the ICE action disruptive to the Mount Pleasant community. "Many people don't want to go outside their homes," Mr. Cervantes said. "They're intimidated by what [ICE] is doing."

Federal immigration raids have been on the rise for the last two and a half years. Also on Wednesday, federal immigration agents raided a Houston doughnut plant and arrested almost 30 workers as suspected illegal immigrants, according to The Associated Press.

Push for reform

In Houston, Dallas and Washington, D.C., advocates for those detained denounced the law enforcement round-ups. Douglas Rivlin of the National Immigration Forum noted the U.S. arrival on Tuesday of Roman Catholic Pope Benedict XVI and the pontiff's message to President Bush on immigration.

"At the same moment that Pope Benedict XVI was admonishing President Bush that the U.S. must treat immigrants with dignity and humanity, the Bush administration was rounding up immigrant workers in raids in at least five states across the country," Mr. Rivlin said in a prepared statement. "What a black eye for the president and for the United States."

Pilgrim's Pride officials have been activists for a comprehensive overhaul of the nation's immigration laws. An attempt at such reform failed last year in Congress. It would have provided a path to citizenship for some of the nation's 12 million illegal immigrants, a guest worker program and toughened enforcement against employers.

Arrests on Wednesday stemmed from an investigation that began a year ago, said John Ratcliffe, U.S. attorney for the Eastern District of Texas. By December 2007, two dozen people were arrested after a criminal complaint in which a Pilgrim's Pride human resources worker was involved, according to federal court documents.