

Immigration agents raid Arizona company



By JACQUES BILLEAUD, Associated Press writer

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TUCSON, Ariz. - Federal authorities on Friday raided a construction company accused of hiring illegal immigrants, detaining eight undocumented workers and arresting several other employees. Scores of agents fanned out in Douglas, along the Mexico border, and in Sierra Vista, about 50 miles northwest, in the raid on Sun Dry Wall & Stucco Inc.'s offices, a foreman's home, the home of a suspected counterfeiter and eight work sites.

Company president Ivan Hardt, 44; the firm's human resources manager, Carol Hill, 42; and four other employees were taken into custody on federal counts of conspiring to knowingly hire illegal workers and harboring illegal workers, said Lauren Mack, a spokeswoman for Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Immigration officials were processing the eight detained workers, all from Mexico. Three other people were charged in state court with supplying workers with counterfeit work documents, officials said.

A message left at the Sierra Vista-based firm was not immediately returned.

Federal authorities in Arizona set up a hot line to help families inquire about relatives who may have been arrested.

The arrests came three days after federal agents raided a leather factory in Massachusetts and detained more than 300 illegal workers. Those arrests drew criticism over the children left behind at schools and day-care centers after parents were detained. Massachusetts Gov. Deval Patrick called it a "humanitarian crisis."

Dozens of those workers were later released for humanitarian reasons, most related to child care. They still must appear before a judge for immigration hearings.

Authorities alleged the leather company, Michael Bianco Inc. in New Bedford, used sweatshop conditions to meet the demands of \$91 million in military contracts to make products including safety vests and lightweight backpacks. The Defense Logistics Agency said Thursday it was suspending the company from bidding on future contracts.

Federal agents also raided a party rental company in Southern California on Thursday and arrested 11 workers on immigration violations, authorities said. That company did work at Marine Corps Air Station Miramar, and the raid was part of an effort by immigration authorities in San Diego to review employment records of military contractors.

In Arizona, immigration agents had promised stepped-up examinations of construction, agricultural, landscaping and service-industry businesses in hopes of deterring illegal hiring and lessening the economic incentive for immigrants to illegally cross the border.

The Pew Hispanic Center has estimated that 10 percent of all workers in Arizona's economy are illegal immigrants, a figure that federal officials have called conservative.

Associated Press writer Steve LeBlanc in Boston contributed to this report.