

Immigration raids at 11 El Balazo restaurants - 63 seized

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U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents on Friday stormed 11 El Balazo restaurants around the Bay Area, arresting 63 illegal immigrants - and drawing the outrage of immigration advocates who had marched the previous day to call for the legalization of undocumented workers.

The raids began at 10:30 Friday morning in San Francisco, San Ramon, Lafayette, Concord, Pleasanton and Danville and involved 62 people from Mexico and one from Guatemala.

Virginia Kice, spokeswoman for the immigration agency, called the arrests "a targeted enforcement action" that is part of a continuing criminal investigation she couldn't discuss further.

Immigration officials photographed, fingerprinted and interviewed all of those arrested. Ten women and one man were quickly released on humanitarian grounds, including pregnancy and medical concerns, pending future immigration proceedings, Kice said.

The rest were being processed, and the majority of them were expected to be released under supervision. Some of the illegal immigrants had prior criminal convictions or deportation orders and will be detained.

Evelyn Sanchez, advocacy coordinator for the Bay Area Immigrant Rights Coalition, was trying to connect with the workers as they were released to ensure they knew their rights and were treated fairly.

She said the immigration agents got search warrants for the El Balazo restaurants, ordered the doors be shut and interrogated the employees inside.

"It was a gross violation of civil rights, and it's just unfortunate that this happened the day after May Day when literally thousands of immigrants throughout the Bay Area marched to have this type of activity stopped," she said. "It just goes to show we need new immigration laws."

In an e-mail blast, Sanchez's group wrote, "The raids and deportations divide our families, traumatize our communities and are a disaster for our economy."

Since its creation in 2003, the Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency has stepped up efforts to stop the employment of illegal immigrants. Last year, the agency made more than 4,900 arrests related to undocumented workers, a 45-fold increase compared with 2001.

"We have a duty to enforce our nation's laws, and we will do that," Kice said. "We will do it professionally and appropriately, but we will do our job."

The Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency has set up a phone number - (415) 844-5345 - for the detainees' family members to get information about their detention status and the process for their removal from the country.