The New War on Illegal Immigration

DHS Secretary Chertoff to ABC: In the Past, 'We Paid Political Lip Service to Toughness'

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It is a new war on illegal immigration that grows increasingly visible and more intense by the day.

"I think we're talking about something the American people have never seen before, which is what do we do and what do we see when the government gets serious about using all the legal tools available to make the law work and to enforce the law," Homeland Security Secretary Chertoff told ABC News in an exclusive interview.

"And that's why there has been a tenfold increase or more in the number of absconders [fugitive aliens] that we've rounded up and sent back. And that's why there have been dramatic increases in our removals, [and] we've gone from one or two criminal cases five or six years ago to about 800 criminal cases this past year, because we are really pulling out all the stops," Chertoff continued.

Across the country, federal agents have been raiding businesses and homes in an unprecedented campaign targeting illegal immigrants.

Just last month, federal agents conducted work-site raids in seven cities, arresting nearly 200 undocumented workers. Another 2,357 illegal immigrants previously ordered deported were also rounded up.

In the last week in California, 1,300 illegal immigrants were arrested -- one of the biggest sweeps in recent memory. On Long Island, authorities rounded up 186 people -- most are believed to be gang members. In Nevada, more that 50 workers at McDonald's restaurants were recently targeted.

But the raids have sparked protests in a frightened and frustrated immigrant community.

"They're not criminals. They want to work," said one protestor. "We want to do things right for them and for this country."

The expansion of the government's deportation efforts has been dramatic.

According to immigration officials, in 2003, only 1,901 alien absconders -- those who had been ordered by a court to leave the country but remained in the country in defiance of the order -- had been arrested.

So far this year, more than 30,000 individuals who've ignored their deportation orders have been arrested.

Immigrations and Customs Enforcement -- an arm of the Department of Homeland Security -- credits its Fugitive Operations Program with a reduction in backlog of alien absconders. The program, which has 75 teams working across the country, also works to ensure that immigration judges' deportation orders are enforced.

"For the first time we're beginning to see a reduction in the fugitive alien backlog," Julie Myers, head of ICE, said at a Wednesday press conference in Los Angeles. "We're down now to approximately 595,000 illegal alien fugitives, down about 36,000 from the beginning of this fiscal year.

"We obviously have much more work to do, but I think that's great progress," she said.

The number of undocumented workers arrested at raids on businesses skyrocketed from 445 to 3,651 over the same time frame.

When a comprehensive immigration bill went down in flames this summer in Congress, Chertoff said he was left with one mandate: Enforce the law. In his Thursday interview with ABC News, he was blunt, offering no apologies.

"For many years the way we dealt with illegal immigration was, we paid political lip service to toughness," he said.

Chertoff contends the government has faced a lot of resistance in the enforcement of the laws, but said, "If you believe that we need to find a way to address the need for workers and we also have to have a humane way to resolve the 11 million who are here and their status, then we do need to go to Congress. We need to get a comprehensive set of legal reforms that will address all these issues, and we've supported that."

"If you choose not to do that, and you say, no, we want enforcement, then we will enforce, and we're not just gonna pay lip service to enforcement. We're gonna enforce using all the tools that are available."

So more raids -- a lot more -- might be on the horizon.