

U.S. Cracks Down on Hiring of Illegal Immigrants

By ERIC LIPTON

WASHINGTON, April 20 — The apprehension on Wednesday of more than 1,100 illegal immigrants employed by a Houston-based pallet supply company, as well as the arrest of seven of its managers, represents the kickoff of a more aggressive federal immigration enforcement campaign intended to hold employers accountable for breaking the law, Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff said today.

Saying the hiring by companies nationwide of millions of undocumented workers is often a form of organized crime, Mr. Chertoff, a former federal prosecutor, said the government will now attempt to combat the practice with techniques similar to those used to try to shut down the mob.

"We target those organizations, we use intelligence to define the scope of the organization, and then we use all of the tools we have — whether it's criminal enforcement or the immigration laws — to make sure we come down as hard as possible and break the back of those organizations," Mr. Chertoff said during a news conference at the headquarters of Homeland Security's Immigration and Customs Enforcement Division.

The news conference came the day after immigration officials apprehended 1,187 illegal immigrants who worked in 26 states for IFCO Systems North America, a company that supplies plastic and wood pallets used to ship everything from produce to pet food.

Company supervisors knowingly hired illegal immigrants, provided them with housing and transportation to and from work, and even reimbursed one undercover agent for the cost of obtaining fraudulent identity documents, Homeland Security Department officials said.

An examination of the company's payroll of 5,800 employees found that just over half of them had Social Security numbers that were either invalid, belong to a dead person or did not match up with names on file, investigators said.

The investigation started in February 2005, when agents received a tip that IFCO workers in Guilderland, N.Y., were seen ripping up federal tax-related employment verification forms, and that an assistant manager present explained that the workers were illegal immigrants who did not intend to file tax returns.

No senior corporate executives at the company were detained, but officials filed criminal charges against seven lower-level managers and a foreman from New York, Texas, Ohio and Massachusetts for conspiring to transport, harbor, and induce illegal immigrants to come to the United States, charges that carry maximum sentences of up to 10 years in jail.

A spokeswoman for IFCO Systems North America did not respond to messages left at her office and on a cellphone.

To combat such practices, Mr. Chertoff and Julie L. Myers, assistant secretary for immigration and customs enforcement, said they plan to hire 171 additional worksite enforcement agents and have asked Congress for legal authority to routinely get access to Social Security records so the department can more easily identify companies where there are large numbers of apparently fake numbers submitted by new hires.

Separately, the department is adding 20 additional special teams of investigators — creating a total of 52 of these teams — to search for some of the 590,000 immigrants in the country who have ignored orders to leave.

It also is working with state and local officials to try to identify and if possible deport a large share of the estimated 630,000 foreign-born individuals who are arrested on criminal charges and put into jail.

The news conference comes just days before the Senate reconvenes and perhaps resumes a debate over a comprehensive rewriting of immigration laws that would, under one proposal, allow millions of illegal immigrants to work legally in the United States while also intensifying border patrol and deportation efforts.

Michael W. Cutler, a former federal immigration enforcement agent and fellow at the Center for Immigration Studies, a research group that supports tougher immigration laws, said that Mr. Chertoff's announcement was more about public relations than substance.

"All they are doing is hanging window dressing on a building that is condemned," he said.

Even with the additional agents the department has asked Congress to hire, it will still have far too few agents enforcing immigration laws, he said, given the millions of illegal immigrants in the country and the thousands of companies that employ them.

In fact, nationally, there were just 127 criminal convictions last year — up from 46 the year before — against employers that knowingly hired illegal immigrants, according to the department, which is far too few to create a significant deterrent against the practice, Mr. Cutler said.

The federal government also currently has no reliable way to determine if foreigners who entered the United States legally — perhaps on a tourist visa — remain beyond the permitted time period and take jobs, which is the way an estimated 40 percent of the illegal immigrants come to the country.

"This is a boat with many holes in it," he said.

Mr. Chertoff said that by combining the greater interior enforcement with a temporary worker program and tighter border control, he is convinced the effort can succeed.

"This strategy is designed to look at every element of the business of illegal migration and attack that business at every point of vulnerability," he said.