

May 2, 2012

TOP STORY: HSI targets bandit crews that exploit the Arizona border

You'll find them in Arizona's most remote areas, brandishing firearms and bullet-proof vests. They are on the hunt for weapons traffickers or drug smugglers. But they're not law enforcement officers. They are bandit crews – criminals – who will do anything to make a profit, which often means murdering and stealing from other criminals in the desert.

"Mexican drug smuggling organizations sometimes use bandit crews to police their desert smuggling routes and rob from competitors," said Kevin Kelly, assistant special agent in charge of Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) in Nogales, Ariz.

The prevalence in bandit crews has resulted in a surge of violence throughout the Southwest corridor. Two men were murdered in the desert near Eloy, Ariz., and three individuals were allegedly robbed and held against their will while their families were extorted for money. In an effort to curb this trend, HSI and the U.S. Border Patrol have partnered to investigate bandit crews and disable their operations. Law enforcement authorities are currently investigating the murders, and a criminal complaint has been filed in Arizona federal court against an alleged bandit.

As a direct result of the HSI and U.S. Border Patrol partnership, two individuals were recently sentenced to five years in federal prison. Border Patrol agents arrested them in the mountains of southern Arizona in June after they were spotted carrying a loaded AK-47 assault rifle and bullet proof vest. The men admitted that they intended to rob groups of drug smugglers carrying backpacks of marijuana through the Arizona desert.

"Thanks to great teamwork with our Border Patrol partners and federal prosecutors, we were able to take these two bandits out of the desert and put them in prison," said Kelly.

<http://www.ice.gov/news/releases/1205/120502nogales.htm>