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Immigration Raid Targets Vast Network

By Miriam Jordan

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More than 800 federal agents fanned out across Arizona and other states Thursday to dismantle a loosely connected network that allegedly transported thousands of illegal immigrants from the Mexico border to cities across the U.S.

Immigration officials launch their largest raid ever against human trafficking in an attempt to dismantle the sophisticated network of businesses that bring illegal immigrants over the border. Plus, economists surveyed by The Wall Street Journal are divided over inflation; and how the demand for cheap food is proof the recession is not over.

Authorities arrested 47 alleged leaders of the human-trafficking chain in raids at shuttle-bus operations and more than 50 houses where illegal immigrants were held by smuggling gangs. Mexican authorities arrested four high-ranking smugglers in the operation that stretched as far as Tennessee.

The operation, dubbed "In Plain Sight," was the largest human-smuggling enforcement action ever conducted by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, authorities said. It followed a yearlong investigation that involved collaboration between ICE and Mexican federal police, as well as the participation of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and state and local law enforcement.

"We have dealt a severe blow to an alien-smuggling industry in Arizona that feeds thousands of aliens into the far reaches of the U.S., including New York, Chicago and Los Angeles," said ICE chief John Morton.

"There is no part of the chain left intact," Mr. Morton said. "Some of the transportation companies had been operating for more than a decade by assuming the appearance of legitimate businesses."

ICE officials said they had targeted a "confederacy" of loosely linked criminal syndicates that didn't answer to a central command or a sole kingpin. The groups operated as distinct business empires that smuggled illegal immigrants from Mexico through Arizona and beyond. Authorities said there was no evidence that the syndicates also smuggled drugs.

The recession, which has pummeled the economy of Phoenix, now the country's fifth-largest city, has inflamed passions over the cost of illegal immigration. Last month, the murder of a rancher near the border fueled new calls for tough measures.

Stopping Smuggling

ICE agents arrested a suspect at Sahuaro Roadrunner shuttle service in Tucson Thursday.

Earlier this week, Arizona lawmakers passed a controversial bill empowering local police to check whether people are in the country legally and requiring foreigners to carry proper identification. Human-rights groups have pledged to challenge the bill in court.

Mr. Morton said Thursday's ICE-led operation wasn't connected to the bill passed by Arizona legislators, but added that heated local debate about the issue "highlights the need for federal immigration reform."

State Sen. Frank Antenori, a Republican who represents three Arizona counties near the border, said the ICE enforcement action doesn't solve the trafficking problem. "My constituents are fed up with traffickers coming through our communities," he said. "The federal government made a promise to secure the border...and that has not happened."

As the federal government has erected fences, walls and electronic surveillance equipment, and beefed up the ranks of border-patrol agents to deter illegal entry in Arizona, migrants desperate to sneak into the U.S. increasingly have turned to smuggling syndicates.

Hitting the smuggling network, rather than the immigrants themselves, is one of the hallmarks of Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano's approach to border enforcement. Ms. Napolitano, a former Arizona governor, also has stepped up inspections of U.S. companies that hire unauthorized workers.

She has also traveled frequently to Mexico to develop alliances with authorities there and to promote intelligence-sharing and joint training to enhance enforcement tactics. Officials said that Thursday's raid relied heavily on cooperation with Mexican authorities.

Human smuggling into the U.S. has evolved into a multi-billion-dollar international business. Officials said the investigation revealed that Chinese nationals, who often spend months in different continents before reaching the U.S., paid smugglers as much as \$75,000 to be brought across the Mexican border and into Arizona. "This isn't just making one or two people rich. This is international organized crime on a grand scale," Mr. Morton said.

Using wire taps, electronic surveillance and undercover agents, the investigation pieced together the expansive smuggling infrastructure, whose cornerstone were several Tucson, Ariz., shuttle companies which authorities allege pretended to operate as legitimate transportation firms.

The shuttle services, which ran vans with company logos painted on the side, ferried illegal immigrants—who had sneaked across the Mexican border with other components of the smuggling chain—from Tucson to Phoenix.

"Everybody got a seat, a seat belt and a fake \$30 ticket," said Matt Allen, special agent in charge of ICE investigations in Arizona.

In Phoenix, shuttle drivers handed over the immigrants to smugglers waiting at parking lots and other strategic drop-off points. These smugglers typically kept the men and women at drop houses until their families back home had paid their smuggling fee, which ranged from \$1,600 to \$75,000, depending on their country of origin, according to investigators.

Once payment was secured, another network with dedicated drivers was charged with transporting the immigrants, often in private vehicles, to their final destination, investigators said. As many as 20,000 illegal immigrants are believed to have used the web of smugglers each year, said a person close to the investigation.

In Tucson, dozens of vans and hundreds of documents were seized from transportation companies.

Federal agents also detained 17 suspected illegal immigrants Thursday during the raid.

Authorities said they seized \$10 million of vehicles and property, as well as weapons including an AK-47 assault rifle.