Immigrant Smugglers Become More Ruthless; Tactics Changing in Face of Federal Crackdown

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Body

No one was going anywhere until the ***smugglers*** got their money.

They had led the group of illegal ***immigrants*** across desolate desert, sneaked them over the border, then packed them in vans and drove hundreds of miles to a hideaway here. What came next was not supposed to be part of the passage.

"The first thing they did was take all their shoes," said Jessica Dominquez, a local immigration lawyer. "Then they were all locked up, with no way to get out."

Some of the ***immigrants*** spent days trapped inside a shack in the San Fernando Valley, waiting for relatives to pay fees higher than they had expected. When police acting on a tip raided the place last month, they found about 80 ***immigrants*** packed shoulder-to-shoulder in darkness and filth.

It was a house of horrors they are ***becoming*** accustomed to seeing.

From Southern California to Texas, as a ***federal*** ***crackdown*** against illicit crossings intensifies along the nation's southwestern border, ***smugglers*** are taking ***ruthless*** new steps to exploit the multitude of poor ***immigrants*** from Mexico and Central America trying to reach the United States at any cost.

In the past few months around Los Angeles, authorities have discovered ***more*** than 650 illegal ***immigrants*** being held captive by smuggling rings -- inside trucks and motel rooms, in squalid bungalows without electricity, even at a brothel where they were being forced to perform sex acts for their freedom.

Around Phoenix, ***more*** than 200 suspected ***smugglers*** have been apprehended since last fall. Authorities have seized about 110 weapons and ***more*** than $5 million in cash from them.

Human smuggling has ***become*** such a large, lucrative enterprise that other criminal gangs are muscling into the market by ambushing ***smugglers*** once they cross the border, kidnapping the ***immigrants*** and then charging higher

prices for their release. Earlier this year, a gang in Los Angeles even planted one of its members in a group crossing over from Mexico and then hijacked the smuggling operation.

"It's getting worse," said Greg Simons, a director of the Coalition for Humane ***Immigrant*** Rights of Los Angeles. "We have people telling us that their loved ones are being held ransom and asking, 'What do we do?' It's ridiculous."

The latest smuggling ring uncovered here illustrates the new extremes of the problem, ***federal*** officials said. Seven ***smugglers*** were caught last month holding nearly 80 illegal ***immigrants*** captive inside a dilapidated 1,200-square-foot house whose windows were covered by iron bars or chicken wire.

According to court documents filed in the case, many of the ***immigrants*** were from Guatemala and had paid the ***smugglers*** at least $3,000 apiece. Their harrowing journey to Los Angeles had taken two weeks.

Many were bound for the East Coast. But they were being held hostage while the ***smugglers*** pressured their families for ***more*** money. The ***immigrants*** told ***federal*** agents they were not allowed to sleep or use the bathroom without the permission of the smuggling ring's leader, whom they called "El Diablo," or the devil.

Investigators said they found ledger books with names of hundreds of illegal ***immigrants*** who had been held against their will inside the house in recent months, along with cell phones and forms to transfer money by wire.

"***Smugglers*** are so glorified in some Mexican music you'd think they just put people on a Greyhound bus and give them cold drinks on the way up," said Kevin Jeffery, a special agent in Los Angeles for the Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement. "It's simply not true. They're callous criminals. It's all about getting their money."

Human smuggling along the 1,950 miles of the southwestern border is an old trade. ***Smugglers*** always have demanded cash for crossings, but they once did most of their work near populated parts of the border. That kept costs low. Immigration agents remember when most ***immigrants*** had to pay lone "coyotes" about $250.

But security ***crackdowns*** in urban areas along the border, such as San Diego, have pushed crossings into remote desert ranges -- and increased demand for smuggling rings with the savvy and manpower to take ***immigrants*** to metropolitan areas. ***Smugglers*** now need drivers, scouts, decoys, rental cars and homes for hiding. Few now cross for less than $1,500.

"The stakes are being raised all the time," said Claudia Smith, who works on ***immigrant*** issues for the California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation.

Security has been tightened along so much of the California border that ***smugglers*** are constantly attempting treacherous and at times deadly crossings through the Sonoran Desert and swarming into Arizona. Some of them have been reaching the East Coast by flying with fake identification out of Phoenix's Sky Harbor International Airport.

In response, ***federal*** officials are deploying scores of new immigration agents to the Arizona border and to the Phoenix airport. They also plan to use unmanned surveillance aircraft this summer along smuggling routes.

Robert C. Bonner, commissioner of the Bureau of Customs and Border Protection, said the aggressive new ***tactics*** in Arizona are working. ***Smugglers*** are being forced to charge higher fees because they have to take ***more*** risks to avoid capture, he said, and their steep prices are deterring some from attempting crossings.

At one point this year, agents were apprehending an average of 2,500 illegal ***immigrants*** a day in Arizona, most of whom were crossing the border with the help of ***smugglers***. That tally has dropped to about 1,600 a day recently.

"I think we're getting a better grip on the problem," Bonner said. "We are putting a lid on Arizona. That's the one door we need to slam shut."

But humanitarian groups say ***smugglers*** are only getting ***more*** cruel and cunning -- and appear to be a step ahead of law enforcement.

To evade new security measures around Arizona, they are driving many illegal ***immigrants*** to the Los Angeles area. Finding haven in such a vast multicultural metropolis -- and blending into round-the-clock crowds at Los Angeles International Airport -- is easier.

Some residents in the ***immigrant*** communities here where ***smugglers*** operate also are reluctant to tip off police or ***federal*** agents for fear that the ***immigrants*** being hidden will be deported.

Once discovered, smuggling rings can still be tough to bust because often only bit players in the shadowy enterprise -- drivers, clerks, lookouts -- get caught in raids on staging houses. And they can be hard to prosecute.

In April, authorities found about 90 illegal ***immigrants*** crammed inside a locked, decayed home in the Watts area of Los Angeles. They arrested two men and a woman at the scene and charged them with smuggling. But prosecutors later dropped the case, in part because the illegal ***immigrants*** had been released from custody.

At the time of the arrests, there was not enough space in a detention center to hold all of them. It also appeared unlikely, prosecutors said, that they would return to cooperate as witnesses or to speak to defense lawyers.

The alleged ***smugglers*** are being held for deportation proceedings, but may never be charged with crimes or lead investigators to the kingpins of the smuggling ring.

But in Texas recently, a Honduran woman pleaded guilty to organizing a smuggling operation that led to the deaths last spring of 19 illegal ***immigrants*** who suffocated inside an unventilated tractor-trailer. Prosecutors said she has agreed to testify against other key defendants in the high-profile case.

Immigrant officials call that news a hopeful sign. But they concede that much ***more*** must be done to disrupt or dismantle smuggling rings -- because they know that many ***immigrants*** will continue to rely on them, despite the growing perils.

"They hear the stories," Simons said. "But they need work. They need to eat. They're desperate."

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