

IMMIGRATION SERVICE ARRESTS 7,898 PEOPLE IN 3-WEEK STING;

IT IS CALLED LARGEST OPERATION EVER

St. Louis Post-Dispatch (Missouri)

June 28, 2001 Thursday Five Star Lift Edition

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Section: NEWS; Pg. A9

Length: 310 words

Byline: The Associated Press

Dateline: WASHINGTON

Body

Almost 8,000 people from 39 countries were arrested this month in what the Immigration and Naturalization Service calls its largest international anti-smuggling operation.

The three-week sting involved law enforcement agencies in the United States, Canada and 12 Latin American and Caribbean countries.

"Operation Crossroads International provides us very important lessons about one of the great, great problems we have today on human smuggling. This multibillion-dollar global industry is becoming increasingly sophisticated and is often intertwined with other criminal activities," said Kevin Rooney, acting commissioner of the immigration service.

Officials said 75 smugglers and vendors of illegal documents were arrested during the operation. Thirty-eight of them face smuggling charges, two in the United States. Fourteen face charges on other immigration-related violations. The remaining suspects face other charges.

In 13 cases, officials also seized illegal drugs valued at \$9 million, the agency said.

The arrests were largely made through checking of documents at hotels, airports, highway checkpoints and safe houses - where smugglers stored immigrants while moving them - in the other countries. Immigration service officers also helped some of the countries to check passengers' documents at international airports.

"The message is clear - the United States is committed with its partners to pursuing smugglers wherever they operate," said Hipolito Acosta, the agency's director in Mexico City, who oversaw the operation.

The countries involved were Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Jamaica, Mexico, Panama, Peru and El Salvador.

Of the 7,898 arrested, seven were U.S. citizens and most were arrested in Mexico. The majority came from Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala.

Classification

Language: English

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OPERATION EVER

Subject: NEGATIVE PERSONAL NEWS (91%); ARRESTS (89%); IMMIGRATION (89%); SMUGGLING (89%); CITIZENSHIP (74%); US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (71%); LAW ENFORCEMENT (71%); ALIEN SMUGGLING (71%); INTERIM MANAGEMENT (63%); ILLEGAL DRUGS (50%)

Company: OPERATION CROSSROADS INTERNATIONAL (91%); OPERATION CROSSROADS INTERNATIONAL (91%); IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (90%); IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (84%); OPERATION CROSSROADS INTERNATIONAL (91%); IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (90%); IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (84%)

Organization: IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (90%); IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (84%)

Industry: AIRPORTS (65%); HOTELS & MOTELS (50%)

Geographic: MEXICO CITY, MEXICO (79%); UNITED STATES (94%); MEXICO (93%); EL SALVADOR (92%); HONDURAS (92%); GUATEMALA (92%); CARIBBEAN ISLANDS (79%); CANADA (79%); COSTA RICA (79%); DOMINICAN REPUBLIC (79%); ECUADOR (79%); HAITI (79%); LATIN AMERICA (79%); NORTH AMERICA (79%); PANAMA (79%)

Load-Date: June 28, 2001