

Major Immigrant Smuggling Ring Is Broken in Phoenix, Police Say

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Body

In a case highlighting this city's prominent role in the **smuggling** of illegal **immigrants** across the border, the authorities conducted a series of raids on Thursday, arresting what they **said** were the leaders of a **ring** that helped transport hundreds of people to way stations in **Phoenix**.

In some ways, it was just a typical day here, where the **police** regularly discover houses with dozens of people held by smugglers until they can pay their passage from Mexico. In a separate operation, Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials and the Maricopa County sheriff here announced the arrests of more than 100 people suspected of being in the country illegally who were on probation for various crimes.

But the raids on Thursday morning, by a task force of state, local and federal officers, provided a glimpse behind what the authorities described as one of the more elaborate operations that bring thousands of people across the border in this state, which has more illegal crossings than any other.

At dawn, officers swarmed houses, mostly in western **Phoenix**, seizing ledgers, money, weaponry and people suspected of involvement in a **major**, lucrative cell that controlled the transportation of people from a border town, Naco, to **Phoenix**.

The authorities made 20 arrests, including those of two Cubans accused of directing the operation. They also detained 210 illegal **immigrants** and discovered 13 so-called drop houses that were way stations for **smuggled immigrants**, the **police said**. In all, the authorities planned to arrest about 75 people, they **said**.

Oddities abounded along the way.

At the house of one man described as a ringleader, the **police** found several hundred roosters bred and grown for his cockfighting hobby. Another housed a shrine with a life-size statue of Jesus and a pile of \$1 and \$5 bills and burning candles at his feet, apparently offerings for good fortune.

In another house, a large family photo of a suspect showed him holding a baby, the hand gripping the girl displaying four large, ostentatious **rings**. An antique four-poster bed filled a small bedroom.

"We often see 'Scarface' or 'Godfather' posters," **said** Lt. Vince Piano of the **Phoenix Police** Department, a lead investigator. "That's the mentality."

Roger Vanderpool, the director of the Arizona Department of Public Safety, **said** toppling organizations like the one on Thursday was central to disrupting **smuggling**.

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"It's organized crime," Mr. Vanderpool said. "Going after the head of the snake, cutting it off, is the effective way of dealing with organized crime."

Several years ago, as border crackdowns in California and Texas funneled illegal immigrant traffic into Arizona, Phoenix supplanted Los Angeles as the prime transshipment point in the Southwest for human smuggling, federal investigators say.

The role has brought increased violence, including assaults and occasionally the killing of people unable to make full payment for their crossing, shootouts among smugglers stealing one another's human cargo and kidnapping.

There has been a surge in the discovery of drop houses, where illegal immigrants are kept while waiting to be transported to destinations across the country, aided by an extensive freeway network here not heavily guarded by a Border Patrol focused to the south.

Where drop houses were rarely found a decade or so ago, nearly 100 were discovered last year in Phoenix and several so far this year, including one on Thursday afternoon with 35 people. This suggests that despite reports of immigrants leaving Arizona under pressure from the economic downturn and a crackdown by the authorities, others continue to arrive.

The group arrested on Thursday morning, the authorities said, primarily drove people who had just crossed the border at Naco to Phoenix, nearly 200 miles away. They often had their own security escort to ward off bandits known as bajadores.

The suspects were said to have worked with a smuggling ring that is based in Naco, Mexico.

The two men described as ringleaders, Jose Luis Suarez-Lemus of Peoria, Ariz., and Roel Ayala-Fernandez of Phoenix, were charged by the state attorney general's office with several crimes, including human smuggling, money laundering, conspiracy and participating in a criminal syndicate. They may also face federal charges.

The immigrants, who were charged about \$2,500 for their transit, were smuggled across the border through the San Pedro River Riparian National Conservation Area, a remote desert site, the authorities said.

The group typically transported two to four loads of six to 10 people a day mainly using rental cars, perhaps several hundred people in all, the authorities believe. The organization made as much as \$130,000 a week.

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Graphic

PHOTO: Terry Goddard, the attorney general of Arizona, left, with Mayor Phil Gordon of Phoenix. (PHOTOGRAPH BY LAURA SEGALL FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES)

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