

Illegal Immigrant Smuggling on Rise; Truck Found in Md. With 40 People Part of Wide Problem, Officials Say

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Body

The discovery of **40 illegal immigrants** crammed into a **truck** approaching the Chesapeake Bay Bridge two days ago has alerted **officials** here to a **problem** that immigration authorities **say** is spreading across the United States: the organized, criminal **smuggling** of foreigners to provide low-wage labor.

Immigration **officials said** the Anne Arundel County incident, in which 19 Mexicans and 21 Guatemalans were **found** in the back of a rental **truck** that crashed near a tollbooth, was the first time in nearly two years that an **immigrant smuggling** operation had been uncovered in this area. In April 1994, 63 **illegal** Chinese **immigrants** were **found** being held captive in a Prince George's County house.

"This far north of the border, we usually discover these things only when there is a traffic accident or violation. But in my opinion, a large percentage of persons illegally employed in this area get here with someone's assistance," **said** Benedict Ferro, director of the **Maryland** district of the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

Other INS **officials said** the discovery of the **smuggled immigrants** also was an indication that with the U.S. government cracking down on border crossings in California and Texas, workers from Mexico and Central America who normally would try to sneak north on their own are turning to long-distance smugglers for help, exposing themselves to physical abuse and extortion.

"These individuals had been in the back of a van for two days, traveling nonstop from Arizona to the Eastern Shore, under horrific conditions," **said** Russ Bergeron, a national spokesman for the INS. "The smugglers know they are at risk, so they keep moving without the least concern for the safety and rights of their passengers. They just want to deliver the load and collect the fee."

Immigration agents spent much of yesterday questioning the **immigrants**, most of whom are in detention facilities in Jessup and Salisbury. **Officials** would not allow journalists to speak with them. They **said** that they believed some could provide testimony about the operation and that the **immigrants** were being delivered to work in a kind of industry particular to the Eastern Shore.

The driver, an 18-year-old Mexican national, was being held in Anne Arundel County on charges of driving without a license and operating a rental vehicle without permission. Five teenagers in the van were moved to a juvenile detention facility in Pennsylvania, **officials said**.

Ferro expressed sympathy for the passengers and disgust for the smugglers, **saying** such operations put the INS in the uncomfortable position of "arresting victims. This is not fun for us," he **said**. **Officials** described the passengers as hungry, ailing and crowded into the small rental **truck** with no light or toilet.

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On the other hand, the drama of a harrowing, clandestine flight highlighted an issue that immigration authorities have been eager to publicize: the need for increased efforts across the country -- not just along the 2,000-mile U.S.-Mexican border -- to deter and investigate illegal, land-based immigration.

"This case graphically illustrates that what we are dealing with are organized criminal enterprises that put people at risk," Bergeron said. "It's not enough to simply increase our presence at the border. We need to have a multifaceted strategy, so we can maintain a flexible response to the problem."

In the last several years, immigrant-smuggling operations have been uncovered periodically in New York, New Jersey, California and Texas. Some involved trucks or vans transporting Mexicans northward from the border; others were more elaborate and abusive schemes in which Chinese immigrants were held prisoner in safe houses, working off debts under slave labor conditions.

In April 1994, INS and FBI agents discovered 63 Chinese immigrants being held for ransom in a house in Mitchellville. They said Chinese gang members were demanding up to \$ 30,000 for each immigrant from their families in New York, after unloading them from a freighter off the Virginia coast.

The discovery of the truck near the Bay Bridge was the first time in recent memory that a group of smuggled Latin Americans had been seized in this area. But local INS agents periodically arrest illegal Latin American workers in restaurants, hotels, farms and food processing plants. Last week, 75 illegal immigrants, mostly from El Salvador and Honduras, were seized in business raids in Montgomery County.

In the smuggling case, authorities said they would keep the adults in custody until investigators decide whom to hold on charges of smuggling or as witnesses. The rest will be given a choice of requesting a hearing before an immigration judge or returning to their own countries. Ferro said that most had requested to return home and that the Mexican and Guatemalan embassies had offered to help them.

INS officials say the Bay Bridge incident appears to reinforce indications that smugglers have been using more organized and sophisticated methods to get people across the border and deliver them to jobs thousands of miles away.

Another disturbing aspect, Bergeron said, is that smugglers increasingly are collaborating with illegal labor contractors who supply workers to "unscrupulous employers" for prearranged jobs. That is what INS officials believe happened in the Bay Bridge incident.

"You don't cram 40 illegal aliens into the back of a rental van and drive 48 hours nonstop from Arizona to the east coast of Maryland without a specific destination and a specific objective," Bergeron said.

"We're seeing sophisticated organizations with contacts in various parts of the United States," he said. The more expensive smugglers offer "package deals" in which people pay to be taken across the border, provided with counterfeit documents, transported somewhere in the U.S. interior and set up in jobs.

In an anti-smuggling operation last month in Arizona, the INS apprehended 818 illegal immigrants at the Sky Harbor Airport in Phoenix in a one-week period. The illegal immigrants were being smuggled to 52 cities in 28 states and the District of Columbia, the INS found.

Staff writer Paul W. Valentine contributed to this report.

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