

9 arrested in raids targeting ecstasy, pot

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Body

Federal agents fanned out in early-morning **raids** across Pennsylvania yesterday and charged nine Vietnamese with intent to distribute 60,000 **ecstasy** pills and more than 100 pounds of marijuana since the start of the year.

After nine months of stakeouts, phone taps and aerial surveillance, Immigration and Custom Enforcement agents hit suspected "stash" and "grow" houses, primarily in Philadelphia and Berks Counties, where it is alleged that marijuana was grown indoors under artificial lights.

They reeled in what they expect to be the first phase of a wide-ranging takedown of up to 25 people, said sources familiar with the investigation.

The U.S. District Court filing does not specify the defendants' immigration status. Officials said Drug Enforcement Administration agents, state police, and Philadelphia police personnel assisted in the investigation.

Analysis of thermal images obtained by the Air and Marine Unit of the Customs and Border Protection service, along with subpoenaed records of patterns of electricity use for a suspect property on Park Place Drive in Sinking Spring, outside Reading, led agents to conclude it was heated and ventilated in ways "consistent with those of an indoor marijuana-growing operation."

Separate houses were used to store the drugs, **pot** and money, the complaint states.

Law enforcement authorities say the smuggling and distribution network operated in Philadelphia and extended north to Canada, west to Pittsburgh, and south to Charlotte, N.C.

Among the parts of the city in which officers conducted the investigation are residences in the 4700 block of Frankford Avenue; the 1800 block of South Fifth Street; the 700 block of Morris Street; and the 2500 block of Jasper Street, among others.

According to the complaint, the defendants transported the drugs in an assortment of cars, sometimes driving to the Berkshire Mall for meetings.

Taken into custody were: suspected kingpin Son Ngo; his girlfriend Hien Dang; and alleged conspirators Linh Dai (also known as "Brother Ba"), Khank Bui, Chi Cuong Hoang, Hai Ngo, Ha Ngo, Sy Do (also known as "Tommy" Do) and Nhue Bao Lam (also known as Ah Bau).

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If their names were hard for investigators to keep track of, their intercepted conversations, in a mixture of Vietnamese, Cantonese and English, were a challenge as well. In the case of foreign-language conversations, translators provided English transcripts, court papers say.

Often, according to the complaint, the defendants spoke in code, referring to "candies" and "shirts" and "boxes" of artificial fingernails - an Asian-owned nail salon was one of the buildings under surveillance - to speak about **ecstasy** tablets, which they offered for sale at \$5 to \$10 a pill.

The complaint says they moved marijuana in quantities of 10 pounds and up.

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