



U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement

Protecting National Security and Upholding Public Safety

News Release

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ICE INITIATIVES TO COMBAT SOUTHWEST BORDER VIOLENCE

As the agency with the broadest law enforcement authority in the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) is uniquely positioned to combat vulnerabilities and threats to America that arise from the nation's borders. ICE has established aggressive intelligence and investigative operations at the nation's ports of entries, between the ports and in the nation's interior.

The southern border of the United States is a region particularly vulnerable to cross-border criminal enterprises and the violence associated with them. In recent years, ICE has seen an unprecedented surge in brutality by drug and human smuggling & trafficking organizations along the Southwest border. Below are a few of the initiatives that ICE has launched to combat the criminal organizations behind this activity.

BEST TASK FORCE / BORDER DRUG VIOLENCE

Drug-related violence along the Texas-Mexico border, particularly in the Nuevo Laredo / Laredo area has surged over the past year. This violence is caused by intense competition between the remnants of the Gulf Cartel and the "Federation." The Gulf Cartel continues to be supervised by Osiel Cardenas Guillen despite his arrest in 2003. Joaquin "Chapo" Guzman Loera and Arturo Beltran Leyva are members of the Federation which is attempting to take control of this important smuggling corridor from the Gulf Cartel

In response, ICE first partnered with other federal, state, and local law enforcement officials in Laredo, Texas, to create a multi-agency operation called Operation Black Jack in July 2005. Operation Black Jack has subsequently evolved into the DHS's Border Enforcement and Security Task Force, known as BEST.

The BEST task force incorporates personnel from ICE, Customs and Border Protection (CBP), ATF, FBI, DEA, U.S. Marshals Service, U.S. Attorney's Office, and key state and local law enforcement agencies. The BEST task force concept incorporates personnel from existing intelligence groups - involved in both collection and analysis - to help identify and disseminate information relating to violent smuggling organizations. The BEST task force has been a highly successful tool to combat violence in the Laredo area.

This coordinated approach has led to significant enforcement results, including the January / February 2006 seizures in Laredo of dynamite, numerous live grenades, as well as materials to make roughly 33 Improvised Explosive Devices. Since its inception, BEST has resulted in 31 arrests and the seizure of 41 assault rifles, 12 handguns, 5 silencers, a large quantity of weapons components, kits, and ammunition, as well as roughly 700 pounds of marijuana, 336 pounds of cocaine and roughly \$1.14 million.

Nationwide, ICE investigations into drug trafficking activity last year resulted in the seizure of more than 300,000 pounds of cocaine, 2.2 million pounds of marijuana, nearly 4,000 pounds of heroin, 2,200 pounds of methamphetamine, and hundreds of thousands of pounds of other smuggled drugs.

HUMAN SMUGGLING / TRAFFICKING INVESTIGATIONS

The violence experienced on the Southwest border is not only caused only by drug trafficking organizations, but also human smuggling and human trafficking rings. These international organizations, which earn hundreds of millions of dollars annually through smuggling and exploitation of illegal immigrants, are becoming increasingly ruthless. In case after case, ICE agents have seen aliens being smuggled in squalid conditions without food, water, or even air. Moreover, they are frequently subjected to violence, forced labor and sexual exploitation upon arrival at their U.S. destination.

Since the creation of ICE in March 2003, ICE investigations into human smuggling and trafficking organizations had resulted in more than 5,400 criminal arrests, 2,800 criminal indictments, and 2,300 criminal convictions. The amount of assets seized by ICE from human smugglers and human trafficking organizations has increased from almost none before 2003 to nearly \$27 million in 2005.

In one case that culminated in January 2006, ICE agents in El Paso, Texas, arrested the leaders of two large-scale criminal organizations on charges of smuggling more than 600 aliens across the Southwest border. The organizations allegedly generated more than \$1.6 million in smuggling fees. Depending on their nationality, aliens were charged between \$1,500 and \$6,000 apiece. During the investigation, ICE agents encountered large numbers of smuggled aliens crammed into trailers for non-stop trips with no food and limited water.

In another recent ICE case, two individuals were convicted on February 2, 2006, in Tucson, Arizona on 15 counts each of smuggling aliens. Both face potential life sentences based on enhancements for causing death and bodily injury during their smuggling venture. These smugglers were transporting aliens in a stolen truck on an Arizona Interstate in October 2004 and, during a high-speed pursuit, caused an accident that involved 10 vehicles. The accident resulted in death of five 5 people, including an elderly couple. In addition, 38 people were injured, including 21 people with "level one" traumas.

SOUTHWEST BORDER TUNNEL ACTIVITY

In some cases, increased actions by law enforcement agencies along the border are driving smuggling organizations underground. In January 2006, ICE worked with its Mexican counterparts, as well as with the DEA and CBP in the United States, to discover a sophisticated tunnel beneath the border between San Diego, California, and Tijuana, Mexico. Mexican authorities later executed a search warrant at a location in Mexico and seized 4,351 pounds of marijuana.

Subsequent investigation revealed that the tunnel was the longest ever discovered under the Southwest border, extending nearly half a mile from Mexico into the United States. Descending to a depth of 81 feet below ground, the tunnel was equipped with lighting, ventilation and cement flooring. An exit was found inside a warehouse in Otay Mesa, California. Approximately 300 additional pounds of marijuana were seized at this location. Since 9/11, federal authorities have discovered more than 20 cross-border tunnels along the U.S. - Mexico border in California and Arizona.

TARGETING THE FINANCES OF CROSS-BORDER CRIMINAL ENTERPRISES

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For example, the smuggling of bulk currency out of the United States, and especially across the Southwest border, has become one of the preferred methods of moving illicit proceeds out of the country. In 2001, Congress criminalized the act of bulk cash smuggling under 31 U.S.C. Section 5332 of the Patriot Act, which makes it a crime to conceal and smuggle more than \$10,000 in currency and monetary instruments into or out of the United States with the intent to evade U.S. currency-reporting requirements. ICE agents have used this authority to make more than 330 arrests. In addition, ICE and CBP have cumulatively seized more than \$160 million of the funds involved in these bulk cash smuggling violations.

ICE's efforts against bulk cash smuggling do not end at U.S. borders. In August 2005, ICE partnered with CBP and the State Department to initiate a training program with Mexican authorities on ways to combat cash smuggling. As a result of this joint financial initiative, Mexican authorities have seized more than \$18 million in cash and \$5 million in negotiable instruments that were involved in violations of Mexican currency-reporting requirements.

Aside from bulk cash smuggling, ICE works to investigate other methods that criminals use to move their illicit funds out of the United States, such as the use of unlicensed money services businesses. These businesses operate outside the traditional banking system and have been long recognized by law enforcement as vulnerable to abuse. The enhancements enacted in 18 U.S.C. Section 1960 under the Patriot Act, provide law enforcement with increased authority to investigate unlicensed money remitters. Since the passage of the Patriot Act, ICE investigations of unlicensed money services businesses have resulted in more than 171 arrests and the seizure of \$25 million.

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) was established in March 2003 as the largest investigative arm of the Department of Homeland Security. ICE is comprised of four integrated divisions that form a 21st century law enforcement agency with broad responsibilities for a number of key homeland security priorities.