15 found adrift in boat off San Diego in smuggling attempt

by Jose Luis Jimenez and Dana Lit

SAN DIEGO - Fifteen people were found adrift Wednesday in a boat off the San Diego coast, the latest in a surge of recent human smuggling incidents.

The group was spotted about 10:30 a.m. about 20 miles north of the U.S.-Mexico border and 15 miles west of Mission Bay.

SMUGGLING ATTEMPT - Fifteen people were found floating in this boat off the San Diego coast Wednesday. Two men were arrested on suspicion of smuggling. The other people on the boat will be deported. CNS Photo by K.C. Alfred. The group had been stranded for about three days. There were no reports of death or serious injuries, but some people were dehydrated and sunburned.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials arrested two men on board, both Mexican nationals, who are suspected of organizing the smuggling attempt.

Passengers on a pleasure cruise, who saw people on the boat waving for help, notified a towing company, which alerted authorities. The group was taken to the Marine Corps Recruit Depot in San Diego, where Customs and Border Protection has a dock.

Lauren Mack, an ICE spokeswoman, said most of the 11 men and four women were Mexican nationals. One woman was from El Salvador.

Mack estimated there have been 20 similar attempts - using a boat to bring illegal immigrants into the country - over the past eight months. In most cases, the boats were found abandoned at a San Diego County beach or near the coast.

"We are attempting to identify the organization behind the smuggling," Mack said.

Mack said the ringleaders are using old boats and hiring inexperienced drivers to sneak people into the country at night.

ICE agents are working to identify the individuals on the boat, who are being processed for deportation.

Agents have learned the passengers paid $4,000 apiece, Mack said. The boat broke down about 20 minutes after it was launched.

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