

Obscure Mexican cartel busted up

by Kelly Thornton

SAN DIEGO - A little-known Mexican drug trafficking organization, which operated without the notoriety of more violent rivals like the Arellano Felix gang, was taken down Wednesday during a multistate bust announced in San Diego by Attorney General Alberto Gonzales.

Investigators discovered the Cazares Gastelum cartel about two years ago in the border towns of California's Imperial Valley. It was first thought to be a small operation but turned out to be a massive ring that moved a large portion of the U.S. cocaine supply from South America to a distribution center in San Diego to at least 23 states, officials said.

MEXCARTEL - 'These arrests demonstrate what can be achieved when domestic and international law enforcement partners team up against a common foe,' Attorney General Alberto Gonzales (right) said in San Diego yesterday. With him were Assistant Attorney General Alice Fisher (left) and Alan Poleszak of the Drug Enforcement Administration. Photo by K.C. Alfred.

Sixty-six people were arrested in a predawn sting Wednesday in San Diego, Calexico, El Centro, Brawley and elsewhere in California, Arizona and Illinois.

The 22-month sting, code-named "Operation Imperial Emperor," has netted 402 people suspected of working for the cartel, more than \$45 million in cash and tons of cocaine, heroin and marijuana, said Gonzales, flanked by recently installed interim San Diego U.S. Attorney Karen Hewitt.

"Today's operation is a serious blow to one of the largest and most significant trafficking organizations," Gonzales said. "These arrests demonstrate what can be achieved when domestic and international law enforcement partners team up against a common foe."

Victor Emilio Cazares Gastellum, the alleged kingpin of the family-run cartel, was indicted by a San Diego grand jury Feb. 23 along with 18 of his suspected lieutenants and foot soldiers on drug, conspiracy and money laundering charges. Cazares remains in Mexico and has not been arrested; U.S. officials said they will immediately seek extradition of Cazares and others.

"The Cazares Gastellum drug empire that rose to such heights of power in only two years, fell today," said Karen P. Tandy, head of the Drug Enforcement Administration, the lead agency in the investigation. "This sprawling drug domain, headquartered in Mexico, penetrated deep into all corners of this country. Today we ripped out this empire's U.S. infrastructure ... and tossed it into the dustbin of history."

Cazares' top lieutenant and son-in-law, Jose Oscar Del Castillo Gallardo, from Sinaloa, was arrested Jan. 20 during a ski trip to Big Bear Lake, said San Diego prosecutor Michael Kaplan.

Castillo acted as a liaison between his father-in-law, the drug supplier and the head of the transportation arm, Carlos Cuevas Jr., of Calexico, who also was arrested Jan. 20, Kaplan said. Both were indicted in San Diego as well.

Officials said the group is an Arellano Felix rival that is aligned with traffickers Ismael "El Mayo" Zambada and Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman.

Guzman, based in Sinaloa, is alleged to be the country's most powerful drug leader. He escaped from a maximum-security prison in 2001 and is at large.

In San Diego - the base of the drug distribution network - five suspected Cazares cartel members were arrested Wednesday at homes and a business, and agents seized three guns and five vehicles, said DEA Special Agent Dan Simmons. Fourteen others were taken into custody in the Imperial Valley, with \$50,000 and 17 vehicles seized, Simmons said.

According to the indictment, Cazares' organization shipped tons of drugs from Colombia and Venezuela through Central America to Mexico. The narcotics were then smuggled across the Southwestern border.

The organization shared the hallmarks of other large cartels - operating as a corporation, using subcontractors to move the drugs via land, air and sea. They often hid drugs in sophisticated compartments in Chevrolet Avalanche pickups or tractor-trailers and drove them through border crossings in Calexico, Kaplan said.

But the group was unique for taking circuitous routes through the backcountry to move drugs, officials said. They crossed the border through the Imperial Sand Dunes, a popular spot with off-roaders, Kaplan said.

In one instance, traffickers carried drugs over the U.S.-Mexico border on a bridge created with sandbags submerged in the Colorado River outside Yuma, Ariz.

The group also behaved more like a business with cells that carried out specific tasks and were insulated from the other cells in case they were discovered. For instance, one lieutenant ran the transportation aspects, another the distribution.

It's difficult to say how long the cartel has operated, or when it began to dominate the trafficking market, Kaplan said.

"They're definitely a very sophisticated trafficking organization that moved overwhelmingly significant quantities of narcotics," he said. "It's not like they suddenly emerged yesterday. They've probably been around for a while, just undetected."

Kaplan said no evidence exists that the Cazares cartel used the violent methods of other groups. "But I'm not telling you it doesn't occur."

The investigation was so complex, with so many targets and so many agencies involved across the country, that it was coordinated by DEA headquarters in Washington, D.C. More than 100 federal, state and local law enforcement agencies participated in the sweep.

"This case went from a very small case to an enormous case with national implications," said Simmons of the San Diego DEA office. "A very small office in the Imperial Valley made a heck of a case with DEA."

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