Sweep lands 1,300 illegal immigrants, mostly criminals

by Matt Krasnowski - CNS

LOS ANGELES, Calif. - More than 1,300 illegal immigrants in five California counties were arrested in the last two weeks during one of the nation's largest immigration sweeps, federal officials said Wednesday.

The roundup by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement was "one of the largest immigration enforcement actions ICE has ever taken," said the agency's Assistant Secretary Julie Myers. The 1,327 people arrested - most of whom were already behind bars - exceeded the 1,297 illegal immigrants taken into custody at meat processing plants in six states last year during an identity theft probe.

"In this operation we located some very dangerous aliens, including those involved in street gangs, as well as those with various criminal records include drug trafficking, domestic violence and sexual assault," Myers said.

Roughly 90 percent of the immigrants taken into custody had criminal records, re-entered the United States illegally or resisted deportation orders, she said. About 600 have already been deported in the operation that began Sept. 19.

More than 500 alleged immigration violators were at large and taken into custody in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino and Ventura counties, officials said.

Nearly 800 "previously unidentified deportable foreign nationals" were discovered when ICE officers searched jails in those counties. Myers said. Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside and San Bernardino counties have agreements with ICE allowing sheriff's officials to check the immigration status of inmates.

The majority of people arrested are Mexican citizens, officials said, but the sweep found alleged immigration violators from more than 30 other countries.

Myers said the sweep showed the effectiveness of the agency's Fugitive Operations Program teams, which were created in 2003 to specifically target fugitive immigrants and enforce deportation orders. The program has rapidly expanded since its inception and the number of arrests by ICE fugitive teams doubled in the past year.

"Too often in the past those (deportation) orders were ignored and aliens who were deported found ways to slip back into the United States," Myers said. "Those days are no longer."

ICE officials said there are roughly 597,000 immigration fugitives in the country. That is down 35,000 from last October and the first time that number has declined, Myers said.

But immigrant rights advocates criticized the sweep for spreading fear and portraying immigrant communities as teeming with criminals, while doing nothing to bring about comprehensive immigration reform.

"They are sending a message (to immigrants) across the country that you will be next," said Angelica Salas, executive director of the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles. "It's creating a terrorizing atmosphere in many of these immigrant communities and ultimately it's not solving the problem."

Anti-illegal immigration groups praised ICE's action.

"It sends the correct message; it's the deterrent message," said Rick Oltman, a spokesman for Californians for Population Stabilization. "These communities will see a decrease in violent crime."

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