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News Releases

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Commercial transportation companies implicated in sweeping ICE investigation targeting Arizona human smuggling networks *47 in criminal custody as agents execute federal search and arrest warrants statewide*

PHOENIX - The owners and employees of five Arizona commercial shuttle services are among the 47 criminal suspects taken into custody following the execution of federal search and arrest warrants across the state Thursday in a far-reaching investigation by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) targeting the infrastructure of several major Arizona-based human smuggling organizations.

Thursday's enforcement actions are the culmination of a comprehensive year-long ICE investigation that expanded beyond its initial focus on several Tucson-based shuttle companies allegedly used by smugglers to transport thousands of illegal aliens from southern Arizona to the Phoenix area. The bi-national investigation, which included unprecedented cooperation with Mexico's Secretaria Seguridad Publica (SSP), ultimately implicated high-level members of human smuggling organizations in Phoenix, Tucson, Nogales, Ariz., and northern Mexico that were serviced by the shuttle businesses.

At a news conference here Thursday afternoon, Homeland Security Assistant Secretary for ICE John Morton and Arizona U.S. Attorney Dennis K. Burke outlined details of the investigation, dubbed "Operation In Plain Sight" because of the brazen nature of the transportation companies' activities. Authorities characterized the case as the most comprehensive human smuggling investigation in ICE history.

"This operation has dealt a serious blow to the infrastructure of some of Arizona's most prolific and profitable human smuggling organizations - organizations that made their money by moving people," Assistant Secretary Morton said. "The defendants wrongly believed they could operate with impunity by hiding behind the veil of legitimacy these businesses provided. Using our investigative expertise, we've dismantled these transnational organizations and literally seized the engines that were driving the criminal enterprise."

"Today's indictments allege a remarkable degree of coordination among alien smuggling organizations and shuttle company operators - all of whom shared a common currency - people and money," U.S. Attorney Burke said. "According to the indictments, the defendants conspired to transport thousands of people across the border and onward to destinations throughout the United States - much of it playing out in the light of day under the guise of legitimate business."

In a massive operation, more than 800 agents and officers from nine federal, state and local law enforcement agencies mobilized Thursday morning to carry out the arrests and searches in four Arizona communities - Phoenix, Tucson, Nogales and Rio Rico. In addition, agents from Mexico's SSP have also made arrests in neighboring Nogales, Sonora, related to the case.

The search locations in Arizona included the offices of four Tucson shuttle services - Saguaro Roadrunner Shuttles, America's Shuttles, Sonoran Shuttles and Nogales Express Shuttles - and a fifth shuttle company in Phoenix, Sergio's Shuttle. According to court documents unsealed Thursday, the aliens transported by the shuttle services were given pre-printed fare receipts in the amount of \$30 in an effort to make the shuttle trips appear legitimate.

The investigation revealed the smuggled aliens were transported from the border to the various shuttle companies or drop houses in Tucson. The aliens were then staged at the shuttle businesses or at the drop houses, before being taken by the shuttle vans to various locations in Phoenix. The aliens paid their smuggling fees, typically using wire transmitters like MoneyGram or Western Union, prior to departing Tucson or, in some cases, after arriving in Phoenix. Although most of the smuggled aliens identified during the investigation were from Mexico and Central America, others came from as far away as China.

The aliens' transportation beyond Tucson was handled by smuggling organizations in the Phoenix area that provided support services to human smugglers in Tucson and Nogales. Besides operating drop houses, those services included arranging transportation for the aliens to their final destinations nationwide. The national reach of the Phoenix organizations is underscored by the execution of additional arrest warrants Thursday in Tennessee.

The suspects taken into custody during the operation include most of the 44 persons named in four separate criminal indictments handed down in the case - see accompanying [fact sheet](http://www.ice.gov/doclib/pi/news/factsheets/plain-sight.doc) (<http://www.ice.gov/doclib/pi/news/factsheets/plain-sight.doc>) for a complete list of the defendants. Those indictments charge the defendants with a variety of federal violations, including money laundering, alien smuggling and conspiracy. In addition, agents arrested seven individuals criminally based upon probable cause. The prosecution is being handled by the U.S. Attorney's Office for the District of Arizona, specifically Assistant U.S. Attorney Munish Sharda in Tucson and Assistant U.S. Attorney Lisa Settel in Phoenix.

The criminal defendants arrested in Arizona are expected to make their initial appearances in federal court Friday in both Tucson and Phoenix. A conviction for conspiracy to transport and/or harbor illegal aliens carries a maximum statutory penalty of 10 years. In determining the actual sentences, the judge will consult the U.S. Sentencing Guidelines, which provide appropriate sentencing ranges. However, the judge is not bound by those guidelines. Of those charged in the indictment, four remain at large and are still being sought.

In addition to the criminal arrests, the case indictments include criminal forfeiture allegations valued at \$10

million. ICE and the U.S. Attorney's office will be seeking to seize assets - including real estate, vehicles and other property - that were derived from the criminal conspiracy. During Thursday's operation, agents seized a total of seven weapons, including an AK-47 assault rifle, and more than 40 vehicles.

An indictment is simply the method by which a person is charged with criminal activity and raises no inference of guilt. An individual is presumed innocent until competent evidence is presented to a jury that establishes guilt beyond a reasonable doubt.

[Learn more about Operation In Plain Sight \(http://www.ice.gov/doclib/pi/news/factsheets/plain-sight.doc\)](http://www.ice.gov/doclib/pi/news/factsheets/plain-sight.doc)

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