



For Immediate Release November 10, 2003

Homeland Security Launches Operation Ice Storm

PHOENIX, AZ Top law enforcement and government officials have joined with the Department of Homeland Security to announce Operation ICE Storm, an unprecedented multi-agency initiative led by the Department's Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to combat human smuggling and the violence it has generated in Arizona and nationwide.

At a news conference in Phoenix this morning, ICE Acting Assistant Secretary Michael J. Garcia laid out details of the effort, which includes the formation of a task force made up of federal, state, and local agencies. Garcia pledged that the task force will use its broad range of authorities and resources to dismantle organized crime outfits that have turned human smuggling into a bloody but profitable venture.

"We're dealing with ruthless individuals who view human life as nothing more than cargo for profit. And as last week's deadly shoot-out in Arizona showed, the value of a dollar is much more important to them than the value of human life, " Acting Assistant Secretary Garcia said. "We're making a commitment to put an end to this violence. Never have agencies on so many levels come together and pooled their expertise to deal with this problem."

ICE, as the largest investigative arm of Homeland Security, brings to bear a broad array of authorities and resources that make it uniquely qualified to lead the fight against human smuggling. ICE agents will combine immigration, smuggling, and financial investigative powers to attack the criminal rings from a variety of levels. ICE's financial investigations expertise, for example, will allow the task force to follow the money trial in ways not previously possible

Garcia also noted that members of the community will play an important role in providing information about human smuggling suspects featured on a newly established ICE Storm "Most Wanted" list using a toll-free public tip line.

Court statistics show that, from January through October, Phoenix experienced 216 homicides, compared to 149 for the same period last year, a 45 percent increase. Over the last few years, there has also been a significant number of incidents involving extortion, kidnapping, and home invasions. In 2002-2003, there were 623 such incidents, 75 percent of which were the result of human smuggling or related activity.

During last week's deadly freeway shooting spree, DHS's Border Patrol helped capture four individuals involved in the shooting. However, several other smuggling suspects remain at large, and ICE will work with the Border Patrol and local law enforcement to track down the rest of the killers. Taking those dangerous fugitives off the street is the aim of the ICE Storm "Most Wanted" list, which authorities unveiled to the media today.

The list features five fugitives linked to violent smuggling incidents in the Phoenix area. Among the "Most Wanted" is Javier Avila-Valdez, who is charged in connection with a smuggling-related shoot-out in 1999 that killed three people, including a 15-year old boy. Five others have been arrested and tried in the case. Each received 16 life terms plus 235 years.

Residents who have information on any of the five "Most Wanted" are encouraged to call the agency's toll-free number - 1-866-DHS-2ICE. Operated on a 24-hour basis, that number also enables the public to alert ICE about suspected smuggling activity and smuggling victims.

"Smuggling-related violence in the Phoenix area has reached epidemic proportions," Acting Assistant Secretary Garcia said. "It affects virtually every segment of the community and we need the public's help to locate these suspects and bring them to justice."

Prosecuting smugglers identified as part of ICE Storm is a top priority. New federal sentencing enhancements will ensure that smugglers who engage in hostage taking will be given stiff sentences, up to life in prison. The United States Attorney's Office is pledging to use this and every other tool at its disposal to deter smuggling activity. In those instances where federal charges are not appropriate, the U.S. Attorney and ICE will collaborate with state and county authorities to explore the possibility for local prosecution.

"This office remains committed to vigorously prosecuting these violent perpetrators to the fullest extent of the law," said Paul Charlton, United States Attorney for the District of Arizona. "ICE's additional resources and the creation of the "Most Wanted List" will aid us in this effort. In talking about people who traffic in human beings, it is important to recognize them for what they are: killers, kidnappers, and rapists."

Since mid-September the United States Attorney's Office has initiated prosecutions in more than 80 cases related to smuggling. In addition to human smuggling violations, the federal charges include money laundering, narcotics smuggling, weapons violations, and other violent crime.

Of particular concern to the agencies participating in the ICE Storm task force is the increasing use of assault weapons by smugglers. Since June, ICE agents in Phoenix have seized more than 80 illegal weapons, including AK-47s, SKS military assault rifles, and a 50-caliber Desert Eagle automatic handgun. (To view examples of typical weapons seized from smugglers visit the ICE Storm webpage at ICE.gov.)

"To make a difference, we must partner with ICE and our other law enforcement agencies to utilize all available resources, focus our efforts, and send the message that violence in Phoenix will not be tolerated," said Phoenix Chief of Police Harold Hurtt.

A critical facet of ICE Storm involves targeting the monetary assets of smuggling organizations. Authorities say "following the money trail" and crippling the organizations' financial infrastructure is crucial to disabling their operations. A financial analysis by ICE showed that during a six-month period in early 2003 more than \$160 million was funneled into Phoenix through money transmitting businesses. Investigators believe much of that money was earmarked to pay smuggling fees.

In support of the operation, ICE is deploying 50 additional Special Agents to the Phoenix area. These resources enhance ICE's investigational capabilities and its ability to respond to local law enforcement. The number of permanent ICE agents available to combat organized smuggling in Phoenix effectively doubled with the establishment of the Phoenix ICE field office.

In addition to ICE, there are 12 federal, state, and local agencies participating in ICE Storm. Those entities include the United States Attorney's Office; U.S. Customs and Border Protection; the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives; the Arizona Attorney General's Office; the Maricopa County Attorney's Office; the Arizona Department of Public Safety; the Phoenix, Mesa, Tempe, and Scottsdale Police Departments; and the Maricopa and Pinal County Sheriff's Offices.

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