

U.S. chases identity theft in biggest work raid ever



By Missy Ryan

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A day after federal agents netted 1,300 meat plant workers in the largest immigration sweep in U.S. history, federal officials pledged on Wednesday to continue a crackdown on illegal workers and identity theft.

"This is going to be a deterrent to illegal workers. ... We're going to try to make it inhospitable to break the law here," Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff said.

Federal officials said they intend to focus law enforcement efforts nationwide on criminal rings that traffic in stolen documents and sell fabricated drivers licenses, Social Security cards and birth certificates to illegal workers, he said.

Tuesday's sweep of meat plants in six states, which temporarily shut the Swift & Co. plants, was the culmination of "Operation Wagon Train," a 10-month investigation into alleged illegal aliens using fake documents, and in some cases documents belonging to real people, to get jobs.

In all, 1,282 workers were arrested when more than 1,000 officers raided plants in Colorado, Nebraska, Texas, Utah, Iowa and Minnesota. Most will face administrative immigration charges, but 65 face more serious charges of identity theft.

Chertoff said the arrested workers from Mexico, Guatemala, and countries as far away as Laos and Sudan were being held at federal and state detention centers around the country.

The sweep was the largest yet in an intensified campaign to rid workplaces across the country of illegal immigrants. In 2002, agents arrested some 500 people in factory, farm and construction site raids. In fiscal year 2006, the number of people arrested topped 4,000.

ID THEFT GROWING

Fabricated documents have long been a problem in the workplace, but the use of real, stolen documents is a newer, more worrying trend, said Julie Myers, assistant secretary of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. Identity theft is now the fastest-growing crime in the country, she said.

"This case illustrates that illegal immigration may be a driving force" behind that trend, Myers said.

Colorado-based Swift, a privately held U.S. producer of beef and pork with \$9 billion in annual sales, has participated in a new government program to verify workers' documents against a national database. Swift criticized Tuesday's raids, saying they violated agreements on the pilot program.

Myers said the government has not charged Swift with any crime, but declined to rule it out.

Stepped-up raids across the country, not just near the U.S. border with Mexico, could be an effort to pressure Congress to overhaul an immigration system widely seen as needing urgent repair, said Deborah Meyers, a senior policy analyst at the Migration Policy Institute, a Washington think tank.

Immigration reform is a priority of President George W. Bush, but overhaul attempts have so far foundered in Congress.

Advocates of tougher immigration enforcement welcomed the coordinated raids, and said more were needed.

"Everyone agrees that the centerpiece of immigration enforcement has to be at the workplace, so it is good to see that they are doing this," said Steven Camarota of the Center for Immigration Studies in Washington.

Union officials condemned what they saw as an unnecessarily rough raid and for singling out Latino workers.

"We're trying to criminalize the real victims here, who are just trying to find a better life," said Mark Lauritsen, a United Food & Commercial Workers International Union officer.

(Additional reporting by Bob Burgdorfer in Chicago and Tim Gaynor in Phoenix)

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