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## Feds Target Sophisticated Illegal Alien Smuggling Ring

Jim Kouri

In a well-coordinated series of law enforcement actions on Friday, federal agents arrested five men and women allegedly involved in a sophisticated Oxnard, California-based human smuggling organization that brought hundreds of illegal aliens -- including infants -- into the United States from Mexico and helped them travel to cities across the nation.

Following a year-long undercover investigation, federal agents fanned out across Ventura County and western Arizona, arresting five of the 11 defendants who were charged late Thursday by the United States Attorney's Office in Los Angeles. A 94-page affidavit filed in relation to the criminal complaint outlines details of the complex scheme, which began with the aliens being directed to a hotel in Sonora, Mexico and then taken to so-called "drop houses" in Yuma, Arizona and Ventura County, CA.

During Friday's enforcement actions, Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents rescued a nine-month-old girl who was being held by the suspects in Oxnard while they attempted to collect smuggling fees from the child's mother. The infant was turned over to child protective services.

In addition to the baby, agents encountered more than 30 other smuggled aliens during the operation. The adults were taken into custody on immigration violations. ICE agents received substantial assistance in the operation from the US Border Patrol and the Ventura County Sheriff's Department.

According to the court documents unsealed Friday, the smuggling organization was headed by a 37-year-old Oxnard man, Juan Ramirez-Ramirez, also known as "El Diablo." Ramirez and two Oxnard sisters, Maria Margarita Renovato-Rangel and Maria De Jesus Renovato, allegedly directed relatives of aliens who wanted to enter the United States illegally to send their family members to the Hotel Internacional in San Luis Rio Colorado, Mexico. From the hotel, the ring's clients were led across the international border near San Luis, Arizona by "coyotes," who then arranged for their transport to the Yuma area.

Once in Yuma, the smuggled aliens were held in so-called "drop houses" until the organization's drivers could bring them to Oxnard. In some cases, the ring reportedly held the smuggled aliens in the

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"drop houses" with little food for more than three weeks. At a recently dismantled "drop house" allegedly used by the organization in Yuma, federal agents spotted a hand-written sign in the window reading "Help Us!"

In addition to Ramirez and the Renovato sisters, the other defendants charged in the case played a variety of roles in the scheme, including "drop house" overseers, transportation coordinators, drivers, and fee collectors.

One of the defendants, Norma Higinia Felix De Sanchez, allegedly specialized in the smuggling of infants and children, some as young as eight months. Court documents describe how De Sanchez brought the children through the port of entry in San Luis, Arizona using false identification documents.

"With these arrests, we have dismantled a criminal organization responsible for smuggling a significant number of aliens into the southwestern United States," said David Wales, resident agent in charge of the ICE office of investigations in Ventura County.

"As this case shows, ICE is not only targeting the people affiliated with these criminal organizations, but we're going after the infrastructure that supports this ruthless and highly lucrative enterprise."

According to the police reports, Ramirez charged \$1,600 to \$2,000 for each illegal alien to be smuggled to the Los Angeles area from Mexico. The prices increased to as much as \$2,800 for aliens destined for other parts of the United States. Ramirez oversaw the payment of individuals who assisted the smuggling ring, including people at the Mexican hotel, "coyotes," "drop house" operators, and drivers. Based on intercepted phone calls, investigators believe the ring has smuggled more than 100 illegal aliens into the United States in the past six weeks alone.

The defendants face a variety of charges including bringing illegal aliens into the United States, transporting illegal aliens, harboring illegal aliens, and conspiracy. Those who were arrested overnight are expected to make their initial court appearances this Monday in Los Angeles.

The case is the first prosecution brought by the newly established Domestic Security and Immigration Crimes Section within the United States Attorney's Office in Los Angeles.

"This new section was created to bring cutting-edge and proactive prosecutions against those who challenge our national security," said United States Attorney Debra Wong Yang.

"The prosecutors in this unit will bring cases against organized, large-scale alien smuggling rings. They will also prosecute complex, immigration-related fraud, such as asylum fraud, marriage fraud, and the widespread manufacturing and dissemination of fraudulent documents."

Jim Kouri, CPP is currently fifth vice-president of the National Association of Chiefs of Police and he's a staff writer for the New Media Alliance (thenma.org). He's former chief at a New York City housing project in Washington Heights nicknamed "Crack City" by reporters covering the drug war in the 1980s. In addition, he served as director of public safety at a New Jersey university and director of security for several major organizations. He's also served on the National Drug Task Force and trained police and security officers throughout the country.

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