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NATION/WORLD

U.S. steps up immigration arrests**New effort sparks criticism from both sides**

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BY MARISA TAYLOR
KNIGHT RIDDER NEWSPAPERS

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WASHINGTON -- In recent months, newly created teams of federal agents have arrested thousands of illegal immigrants who have lived and worked in the United States for years without interference. Most were immediately deported.

Since October, 13,089 immigrants have been detained, up more than 60% from the same period in 2004. The arrests peaked in May, when agents picked up a record 1,600 people nationwide.

Immigrant-rights advocates called the sweeps excessive and heavy-handed, while supporters of tougher enforcement said even more must be done to discourage illegal immigration.

"Whenever we do any sort of enforcement action we get praise and criticism," said Dean Boyd, a spokesman for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, which is overseeing the arrests. "Immigration is a polarizing and divisive issue."

The spike in deportations comes as the Bush administration is under pressure to improve its detection of illegal immigrants inside the country, rather than concentrating its efforts largely at the U.S.-Mexico border.

Immigration officials said the arrests were up because more agents have been assigned full time to find them. Since October, the number of fugitive-search teams assigned to track down immigrants inside the country has increased from 18 to 38. The agency plans 14 more teams by the end of September.

"It's a higher priority," said John Torres, the director of the immigration agency's detention and removal operations.

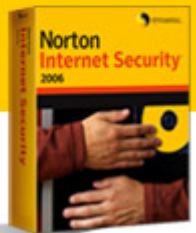
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Some immigrants complain of being treated harshly.

Nancy Arseno, a U.S. citizen, said her husband, Mario, was arrested two weeks ago at the family's home in Las Vegas by a team of 15 armed officers. The officers handcuffed him even though he wasn't resisting, and they refused to allow him to say good-bye to the couple's six children, she said.

Arseno said the officers were polite, but she thought they should have given her husband a chance to turn himself in voluntarily.

"It didn't need to be so dramatic," she said. "They acted like he had killed someone."

Mario Arseno, 31, came to the United States legally in 1993 on a work visa. The traveling musician from Peru forgot to renew his visa, his wife said, and an immigration judge ordered him deported in 1995. She said he never received a deportation notice and missed his chance to challenge it in court.

Nancy Arseno said immigration officers could have easily found her husband because the family has lived at the same address for years.

"I don't understand why they waited until now," she said. "If they really didn't want people like my husband in the country, why did they allow him to work, pay taxes and marry a U.S. citizen?"

Immigrant-rights advocates said many of the immigrants have been living in the United States for years and that their only crime was being here illegally.

"The show of force is so over the top," said Cheryl Little, the executive director of the Florida Immigrant Advocacy Center in Miami. "These sweeps are conducted so fast and so unexpectedly that those ensnared have no chance to prepare for their departure."

Calls for harder crackdowns

John Keeley, a spokesman for the Center for Immigration Studies, a research center in Washington that favors tougher immigration enforcement, called the sweeps "largely symbolic."

"The administration is responding belatedly and under intense pressure to do more about interior enforcement," he said. "But you would need thousands of more officers to put a dent in the numbers."

Each year, the list of fugitive immigrants grows by more than 40,000. According to government estimates, more than 500,000 immigrants remain in the country even after they've been ordered to leave.

Torres said officers weren't arbitrarily arresting people off the streets but were targeting immigrants who had been ordered deported after exhausting all their appeals.

Of the 45,728 immigrants arrested since March 2003, when the first fugitive-search teams were created, 21,367 had criminal records.

"The people we're arresting have already been afforded all of their due-process rights," Torres said.

How times have changed

In the past, finding fugitives was a much lower priority because of a lack of

resources.

The agency notified immigrants that they had been ordered deported with the expectation that they would turn themselves in to authorities. But many agents called the deportation orders "run letters" because few immigrants showed up -- most simply disappeared.

Once immigrants became fugitives, officers were supposed to research locations where they might be living. But that kind of research could take hours, and officers often weren't given the time to find the immigrants.

In 2003, the immigration agency began forming special fugitive-search teams in regions that have the highest concentration of illegal immigrants. Officers are assigned to the teams full time and given special training.

Since last October, officers assigned to the teams have arrested 972 immigrants in Miami, 289 in Dallas and 2,306 in Los Angeles.

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