

Fox News.com - February 28, 2007

## **Justice Department Announces \$45 Million Multi-Ton Drug Bust Targeting Mexican Organization**

By: Liza Porteus

The Justice Department on Wednesday announced the largest drug bust in 10 years as it rounded up more than 400 members of a Mexico-based cartel distributing tons of cocaine, marijuana and methamphetamine in the United States.

U.S. Attorney General Alberto Gonzales announced the roundup Wednesday during a press conference in San Diego.

"Operation Imperial Emperor" targeted the Mexico-based Victor Emilio Cazares-Gastellum, a.k.a. "Victor Emilio Cazares-Salazar," drug trafficking organization, which Justice says has been responsible for supplying multi-ton quantities of cocaine, as well as large amounts of methamphetamine and marijuana, monthly to distribution cells throughout the United States.

The organization has also laundered millions of dollars generated from this illegal activity, according to the Justice Department.

"Today's actions deal a significant blow to the Victor Emilio Cazares-Gastellum drug trafficking organization, whose members are accused of importing and distributing multi-ton quantities of cocaine and other illicit drugs to communities across the country on a monthly basis," Gonzales said. "These arrests demonstrate what can be achieved when domestic and international law enforcement partners team up against a common foe."

Federal or state charges were unsealed Wednesday morning against 139 defendants in California, Arizona, Illinois and New York.

The 20-month investigation led by the Drug Enforcement Administration and aided by more than 100 federal, state, local and foreign law enforcement agencies, has so far resulted in the seizure of approximately \$45.2 million, 27,229 pounds of marijuana, 9,512 pounds of cocaine, 705 pounds of methamphetamine, 227 pounds of pure methamphetamine or "ice," and 11 pounds of heroin.

The investigation has also netted \$6.1 million in property and assets, as well as roughly 100 weapons and 94 vehicles. The drug ring is based in Sinaloa, Mexico.

"What's key about this organization is they obviously were dealing in all types of drugs, which means their customers, their victims, were throughout the whole spectrum of U.S. society - rich, poor, old, young, the methamphetamine especially and what we've seen here is a new trend in past couple of years," Justice special agent-in-charge Steven Robertson told FOXNews.com. "This organization had cells, which are little distribution sub-groups based throughout the U.S."

Robertson, who said the bust is the largest in about a decade in terms of amount of drugs and assets seized, as well as number of arrests, said law enforcement is seeing a disturbing new trend

in the world of narcotics.

In the past, meth was cooked in small toxic labs here in the United States, "where literally you could cook it on a hotplate in your apartment," Robertson said.

Some of the products being used to make meth - like ephedrine and pseudoephedrine products found in cold medicines - are normally ground up and put through a filtering and cooking process.

But The Combat Meth Act restricted the number of tablets a person can buy in one day, thus resulting in some regular cold medications to now be behind the counter at your local pharmacy.

The amount one person can buy is now limited to 3.6 grams, which is 146 30-milligram tablets during a 30-day period.

It's because of that restriction that makes making meth harder here in the United States, so, Mexican drug rings have seized that opportunity.

"Mexican drug trafficking organizations have realized 'ok, there's a new need,'" Robertson said.

So, drug cartels are cooking meth in what are called 'super labs' outside of the country, then smuggling the drugs into the United States through regular smuggling routes along the southern border.

"This organization branched out and was in fact moving significant amounts of meth, in addition to cocaine and marijuana," Robertson said.

According to court papers unsealed Wednesday, the Mexico-based organization contracted the transportation of drugs to the United States by land, air and sea. Metric ton shipments were transported out of Colombia and Venezuela, through Central America to Mexico, by tractor trailer, non-commercial vehicles, and aircraft.

Once in Mexico, the narcotics were transported into the United States through various border entries in the Southwest.

After arriving in the United States, the drug shipments would be broken down further in cities like Los Angeles and San Diego for further distribution in Nevada, Arizona, New York, New Jersey, Ohio, Colorado, Georgia, Alabama, Arkansas, Kentucky, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Maryland, Texas, Missouri, Oklahoma, Illinois, Kansas, Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, Washington and Oregon.

"The Cazares-Gastellum drug empire that rose to such heights of power in only two years, fell today at the hands of DEA and our partners," said DEA Administrator Karen P. Tandy. "This sprawling drug domain, headquartered in Mexico, penetrated deep into all corners of this country. Today we ripped out this empire's U.S. infrastructure from its commanders and transportation coordinators to its local distribution cells across the country, stripped it of \$45 million in cash, and tossed it into the dustbin of history."