

SANDBAGGED! DEA CASE NETS 400 ARRESTS, \$45 MILLION AND 18 TONS OF DRUGS

“Operation Imperial Emperor” uncovers sandbag bridge over river at U.S./Mexico border

SAN DIEGO - A long-term investigation into a Mexican drug trafficking organization and its U.S.-based distribution cells has resulted in the arrest of more than 400 individuals nationwide, including the arrest of more than 66 individuals this morning in California , Arizona , New York and Illinois , Attorney General Alberto R. Gonzales announced today at a press conference in San Diego.

The multi-agency law enforcement effort, called “Operation Imperial Emperor” targeted the Mexico-based Victor Emilio Cazares-Gastellum, a.k.a. “Victor Emilio Cazares-Salazar,” drug trafficking organization, which 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.

The 20-month investigation, which was led by the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), has thus far resulted in the seizure of approximately \$45.2 million in U.S. currency, 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.

This morning, federal or state charges were unsealed against 139 defendants in the Southern District of California, the Central District of California, the Northern District of California, the District of Arizona, the Northern District of Illinois, and the Southern District of New York. More than 66 of these defendants were arrested today, bringing the total number of arrests during the course of this long-term investigation to more than 400.

“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,” said Attorney General Gonzales. “These arrests demonstrate what can be achieved when domestic and international law enforcement partners team up against a common foe.”

According to court papers unsealed today in various federal jurisdictions, the Mexico-based Victor Emilio Cazares-Gastellum organization contracted the transportation of narcotics 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 points of entry on the Southwest border.

After arriving in the United States, the drug shipments would be broken down further in cities like Los Angeles and San Diego for subsequent transportation to and distribution in locations around the country, including 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.”

“This operation is an example of strong cooperation among multiple international, federal, state and local law enforcement agencies that dismantled a major drug trafficking enterprise operating between the U.S. and Mexico . Despite efforts to conceal their criminal activities, law enforcement prevailed and will continue to pursue criminal enterprises threatening the safety and security of our communities,” said Robert. S. Mueller III, Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

The federal prosecutions in connection with today’s arrests are being handled by U.S. Attorneys for the Southern District of California, Central District of California, District of Arizona, Northern District of Illinois, and Southern District of New York. Additionally, local prosecutions will occur in the states of California , Arizona and Illinois.

This investigation involved the combined efforts of federal, state and local law enforcement nationwide through the Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force (OCDETF). More than 100 federal, state, local and foreign law enforcement agencies contributed investigative and prosecutorial resources to Operation Imperial Emperor.

The investigative efforts were coordinated by the multi-agency Special Operations Division, comprised of agents and analysts from the DEA, FBI, ICE, Internal Revenue Service, U.S. Customs and Border Protection, as well as attorneys from the Criminal Division’s Narcotic and Dangerous Drug Section.