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Feds charge 22 in fake ID case; activists denounce midday sting

BYLINE: Tara Malone, Daily Herald Staff Writer

Nearly two dozen people were charged Wednesday in connection with what prosecutors called a massive fake ID ring that was based in Chicago but spanned the nation, peddling up to \$3 million worth of documents a year.

As many as 100 fake driver's licenses, Social Security cards and green cards were sold daily for up to \$300 a set, U.S. Attorney Patrick Fitzgerald said. The alleged operation also farmed false documents to Denver and Los Angeles, the complaint states.

Complete with two shifts of vendors, lookouts, runners and smugglers, the operation reveals a "serious gap in our national security," Fitzgerald said.

He rejected claims the sting that involved roping off a busy shopping plaza midday was designed to subdue immigrants days before a massive May 1 march. That charge was leveled by lawmakers and activists who called the arrests a "military-style operation."

"There is a great debate going on in our country about the immigration situation," Fitzgerald said. "This case is not about that debate."

Yet the sting highlights a deepening crack in the nation's immigration system.

An estimated 12 million immigrants live and work illegally in this country - about 520,000 of whom reside in Illinois - often relying on falsified documents to do so.

Brian Perryman, a former director of the Immigration and Naturalization Service in Chicago, said recently, "We're totally destroying our identification systems in the U.S."

Ten of the 22 people charged - who live in Chicago and suburbs such as Wood Dale, Oak Lawn and Cicero - are fugitives, officials said. Four are believed to be in Mexico.

The alleged ringleaders - Julio Leija-Sanchez, 31, and Gerardo Salazar-Rodriguez, 34, -also are accused of conspiring to kill competitors, charges that triggered the arrests, officials said.

The organization allegedly smuggled people into this country from Mexico, forcing them to work off their debt by hawking fake IDs, according to the complaint.

All but one of the dozen people arrested remain in custody. They will appear in federal court for a bond hearing Friday, said Randall Samborn, a spokesman for the U.S. attorney's office. The only woman charged was released Wednesday to home confinement. Caterina Zapien-Ruiz, 28, is a new mother, Samborn said.

All those charged were living and working here illegally, said Elissa Brown, special agent in charge of the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's Chicago operation.

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The ring's customers, drawn from across the region, were Algerian, American, Canadian, Haitian, Indian, Mexican, Nigerian, Pakistani and Polish.

The probe that began more than three years ago culminated Tuesday when federal agents armed with rifles and bulletproof vests cordoned off a shopping plaza in Little Village, one of the Midwest's largest Latino communities.

Latino men between the ages of 18 and 40 were stopped while agents matched people with the names and birth dates of those targeted in the indictment, Brown said.

That the operation unfolded midday with families nearby riled many lawmakers and activists who decried the arrest methods as "excessive."

"We're certainly not going to oppose going after criminals who are murdering people. I'm for that," said Kim Bobo of the Interfaith Worker Justice organization. "But people were terrorized."

During a Daley Plaza rally, Cook County Commissioner Roberto Maldonado said, "They treated everyone like the criminals they were looking for." Maldonado said Wednesday he will back an ordinance to shield undocumented immigrants from federal enforcement in Cook County.

Federal officials defended their timing and tactics. Fitzgerald said it's a matter of taking criminal enforcement to the criminal activity, whether that's in a Latino mercado or a Michigan Avenue department store.

"If there were a State Street organization operating on State Street," Brown said, "yes, we would have done the same thing."