

## Human smuggling trade booming across nation

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WICHITA, Kan. (AP) — Federal prosecutors say smugglers facing stiff penalties if caught transporting drugs are increasingly turning to still-lucrative cargo that is less likely to lead to their capture or result in punishment that's as severe: illegal immigrants.

"These organizations have realized there is a lot less exposure smuggling humans than smuggling drugs," said Assistant U.S. Attorney Brent Anderson.

With the typical fee for transporting an illegal immigrant running between \$1,000 and \$2,000 each, it is not uncommon for a smuggler to make \$20,000 to \$30,000 for a 24-hour trip by ferrying people from border states to the nation's interior, according to the U.S. Attorney's Office in Wichita.

Anderson, who prosecutes the bulk of immigration-related cases in the state, said immigration officials in Kansas receive up to a call a day from law enforcement agencies about loads of illegal immigrants they have encountered.

States in the central U.S., such as Kansas, have become so overrun by human smugglers driving to or through the state that law enforcement agencies contend they often can arrest only the worst offenders — when serious injury or death occurs, when immigrants are held in inhumane conditions or when some other crime is committed.

The latest Kansas smuggling incident ended with a woman dying of apparent dehydration after being dropped off by smugglers at rest stop Wednesday along Interstate 70 in Gove County along with her adult son and another man, said 2nd Lt. John Eichkorn of the Kansas Highway Patrol.

The van, which was carrying 16 illegal aliens, left the sick woman at the rest stop, where she was found unconscious by the Highway Patrol, said ICE spokesman Carl Rusnok said. She died later at the hospital. The van was escorted back to the rest stop by the Kansas Highway Patrol and all occupants are in custody.

"The alien smugglers are notorious for doing this in Arizona deserts," Rusnok said. "If you are at all slowing the group down, they will just leave you there. The alien smugglers are known not to have any regard for human life whatsoever."

The latest death comes a month after Fernando Tello Del Pilar, 22, of Veracruz, Mexico was arrested Feb. 21 in Rolla in remote southwestern Kansas after the small pickup he was driving lost a tire and overturned, killing three of the 19 illegal immigrants it was carrying.

However, less than two weeks later, a U-Haul van carrying 12 illegal immigrants that was stopped for minor traffic violations near Wichita was released, after officials from U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement told the Sedgwick County Sheriff's Office they were busy working on another immigration case in Salina.

Federal prosecutors have defended the action, noting the case that kept ICE busy involved a smuggler with 18 illegal immigrants. They also contend ICE would have responded to the Wichita stop had it known the vehicle was a moving van and not a smaller vehicle.

The Pew Hispanic Center has estimated 11.5 million to 12 million illegal immigrants are in the United States. The center estimates illegal immigrants fill one out of every four agricultural jobs — the industry at the cornerstone of rural economies, such as in Kansas.

Faced with overwhelming numbers of illegal immigrants, ICE is putting most its time and resources going after so-called criminal aliens, a shift in emphasis the agency contends started even before the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

"It is a matter of priorities. If we are going to focus on illegal activity, I think most people would agree that given the choice of arresting a worker at a fast food restaurant and arresting someone who has a conviction for rape, we should go after the latter," said ICE spokesman Tim Counts.

One issue law enforcement officials face when deciding whether to spend the resources dealing with a dozen or more illegal immigrants found in a smuggling run through the state is where to keep people arrested for deportation. ICE has said it has 20,000 beds in contracted detention facilities nationwide.

For illegal immigrants caught in Wichita, agents would have to find space at the Butler County jail for the two weeks it typically takes to complete deportation proceedings. It is far easier to find beds for one or two illegal immigrants arrested on serious crimes than for a van of a dozen or more illegal immigrants traveling through the state looking for work.

A minor in the vehicle further complicates the process. The nearest facility to Kansas that takes illegal juvenile immigrants is in Chicago, according to the U.S. Attorney's Office.

Of the roughly 160,000 illegal immigrants deported from the United States last year, about 83,000 had committed a crime other than being in the country illegally, according to ICE. Last year, the agency deported 6,322 immigrants brought into its Chicago facilities from the six-state region encompassing Kansas, Missouri, Illinois, Michigan, Indiana and Kentucky.

In October 2003, ICE initiated Operation Ice Storm to target criminal alien smuggling operations in states along the nation's southwestern border — particularly around the Phoenix and Tucson areas, the epicenter of criminal smuggling operations, Counts said.

The area has been beset by gang warfare and organized crime financed by human smuggling, he said, noting that in some cases groups of illegal immigrants smuggled in would be kidnapped by another smuggling organization trying to extort more money from them.

Sexual predators are another priority group targeted for deportation. The agency's Operation Predator, begun in July 2003, has so far netted more than 6,500 people. Not all are foreigners. Many are U.S. citizens accused of trading child pornography over the Internet from other countries, triggering ICE's customs enforcement powers.

A more recent ICE initiative, Operation Community Shield, went after foreign-born gang members. Since it was launched in February 2005, the agency said it has charged 2,388 criminal aliens from 239 different gangs across the nation.