



76 Arrested as Officials Break Up Mexico-to-Arizona Drug-Smuggling Ring

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The New York Times on October 31, 2011 released the following:

“By MARC LACEY

PHOENIX — Law enforcement officials on Monday announced the breakup of a large drug-smuggling ring that used lookouts on hilltops in southern Arizona to move huge quantities of marijuana and other drugs across the Mexican border to users throughout the United States.

Over the last month and a half, federal, state and local officials have arrested 76 people, from organizational bosses to stash-house guards to those who transported the drugs in backpacks and in vehicles, the authorities said. All were linked to the Sinaloa cartel run by Joaquín Guzmán, Mexico’s richest and most wanted outlaw, who goes by the nickname El Chapo, officials said.

Speaking at a news conference on Monday, Arizona officials estimated that the ring had been in operation for at least five years and had generated more than \$2 billion in profits by smuggling more than three million pounds of marijuana, 20,000 pounds of cocaine and 10,000 pounds of heroin into the United States. Such large smuggling rings usually use tractor-trailers to get their contraband across, the authorities said, but this operation relied mostly on migrants on foot straining under their loads.

The authorities acknowledged that the huge smuggling ring operated under their noses, in rugged terrain that is difficult to patrol. The drugs would be carried across the border in relatively small quantities and then transported north to a network of stash houses in the Phoenix area. From there, the contraband would be sold to distributors nationwide.

The route was through the most desolate desert areas of southern Arizona, from Yuma to just east of the border



community of Sells, including the sprawling Tohono O’odham Indian reservation. Spotters with radios or cellphones were used to point out the presence of law enforcement and divert loads, the authorities said.

The investigation began in June of last year with a traffic stop in Pinal County of a suspect who later provided details of the operation, said Sheriff Paul Babeu. Sheriff Babeu, who is considering a run for Congress, cited the arrests to buttress his argument that the border remains porous, despite the Obama administration’s insistence that it was more secure than ever. About half of those arrested were illegal immigrants and the other half were American citizens or holders of valid visas, officials said.

While calling the arrests a blow to the smugglers, the authorities were cautious in declaring victory.

“I expect there will be a shift,” said Matthew Allen, special agent in charge of Arizona for Immigration and Customs Enforcement’s Homeland Security Investigations. “One investigation is not going to put them out of business. We have to continually adapt.”

Last month, the authorities were reminded of how challenging the drug war had become when they arrested a Homeland Security official stationed at the border, charging him with leading the police on a chase through the desert during which he hurled packages of marijuana from his government vehicle.

Last week, a federal grand jury in Tucson handed up an indictment charging a Border Patrol agent with accepting a bribe to let a truck that he believed was smuggling drugs and migrants past a checkpoint in southern Arizona, federal officials said. When the agent asked the driver if he was a United States citizen, the driver responded “buenos dias” and was waved through, officials said.

Mr. Guzman has made buying off the Mexican authorities his trademark, which has frustrated efforts to capture him from the mountain hamlets where he operates. President Felipe Calderón of Mexico, who has been criticized for not catching the country’s No. 1 drug lord, recently said he suspected that Mr. Guzman may be hiding in the United States. American officials said they had no evidence to back up that claim.”

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Douglas McNabb and other members of the U.S. law firm practice and write and/or report extensively on matters involving Federal Criminal Defense, INTERPOL Red Notice Removal, International Extradition and OFAC SDN Sanctions Removal.

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