



175 arrested in Mexican drug cartel bust

Feds seize hundreds of millions of dollars in cash, cocaine

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ATLANTA - Agents arrested 175 people in the U.S. and Italy and seized hundreds of millions of dollars in cash and drugs in a crackdown on an extremely violent Mexican drug cartel, U.S. authorities announced Wednesday.

The cartel is responsible for importing tons of cocaine, methamphetamine, heroin and marijuana from Central and South America into the U.S. and then distributing it, Attorney General Michael Mukasey said.

The ring is also believed to have laundered millions of dollars and has become a driving force behind escalating violence in Mexico and along the southwestern border of the U.S.

The arrests Tuesday and Wednesday were part of an operation code-named Project Reckoning that confiscated more than \$60 million cash, 35,000 pounds of cocaine, more than 1,000 pounds of methamphetamine, 19 pounds of heroin and more than 50,000 pounds of marijuana, the Drug Enforcement Administration said. Authorities also seized 176 vehicles and 167 weapons.

The street value of the cocaine could be some \$320 million, according to prices cited by DEA agents in news reports.

'Break their spine'

Hundreds of law-enforcement officials were involved in the arrests, which were announced in Atlanta. That city, where 43 people were arrested, was identified as a regional hub for the cartel.

The Mexico-based cartel has high-level members in other regional hubs, such as Dallas, and is branching out into smaller cities such as Jackson, Miss., and Birmingham, Ala., said DEA agent William Matthews.

People were arrested in a dozen states as agents targeted the cartel's infrastructure, including transportation routes and distribution cells.

Through collaboration with Italian authorities, 10 people were also arrested in the Calabria region of Italy on charges related to drugs trafficked through New York.

"We're going after the top leadership on down to regional leaders," Matthews said. "By doing this we're trying to break their spine."

Officials said indictments were unsealed Wednesday in U.S. District Court in Washington for three alleged leaders of the cartel: Ezequiel Cardenas-Guillen, Heriberto Lazcano-Lazcano and Jorge Eduardo Costilla-Sanchez.

All three are believed to be in Mexico. American authorities are working with their Mexican counterparts to catch them.

The Associated Press and Reuters contributed to this report.

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