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MEXICO UNDER SIEGE

16 indicted in California drug-smuggling probe

The alleged distribution cell for a Mexican drug cartel is accused of hiding cocaine and marijuana in vehicles crossing the border at Calexico. Four are arrested and 12 remain at large.

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Full coverage of Mexico's drug war

By Richard Marosi
August 26, 2009 | 8:06 p.m.

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California authorities announced indictments Wednesday against a distribution cell of the Sinaloa drug cartel that allegedly smuggled large amounts of cocaine and marijuana into Southern California through the border crossing at Calexico.

The 16 suspects are accused of transporting the drugs in compartments hidden in vehicles and then storing the contraband at stash houses in the Los Angeles area, authorities said. From there, authorities said, the drugs were distributed to cities across the U.S. and Canada.

The indictments are the latest stemming from a series of investigations that have focused on the port of entry at Calexico, which is across the border from Mexicali, Baja California's sprawling state capital.

Authorities seized 420 pounds of cocaine and 136 pounds of marijuana during the eight-month operation, which included planting an undercover officer in the smuggling ring, said California Atty. Gen. Jerry Brown.

"This notorious cartel smuggled massive quantities of cocaine and marijuana into Southern California, fueling addiction and violence across the nation," Brown said at a news conference in Imperial County.

Authorities arrested four of the suspects in recent months; the other 12 remain at large. Most of the suspects are Mexican nationals who lived in Fontana, Long Beach, Rialto and South Gate. Another four are Mexicali residents.

Authorities said the investigation started through tips from confidential informants and expanded when the undercover officer infiltrated the group, meeting with its members 30 times. Officers conducted more than 100 surveillance operations throughout Southern California and seized \$2.5 million, authorities said.

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surveillance operations throughout Southern California and seized \$1.7 million, authorities said.

The joint investigation was carried out by the California Bureau of Narcotic Enforcement, Imperial County Narcotic Task Force, and the Imperial County sheriff and district attorney's office.

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