



NEWS RELEASE

United States Attorney's Office Central District of California

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COACHELLA VALLEY GANG TASK FORCE MAKES 13 ARRESTS IN FEDERAL NARCOTICS TRAFFICKING CASE IN WHICH MEXICAN MAFIA MEMBER RAN OPERATION THAT DISTRIBUTED DRUGS AND COLLECTED 'TAXES' FROM LOCAL STREET GANGS

A task force made up of federal, state and local law enforcement has arrested 13 people accused of participating in a Coachella Valley narcotics-trafficking operation, authorities announced today. The 13 defendants face federal charges that allege the drug dealing was controlled by the ranking member of the Mexican Mafia in the Coachella Valley, who both sold narcotics and collected "taxes" from street gang members who were allowed to sell drugs in his territory.

The arrests, which were made yesterday as part of Operation Clean House, are the result of an investigation by the Coachella Valley Gang Task Force. The task force is comprised of agents and investigators with the Federal Bureau of Investigation; the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives; the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development; the California Department of Justice's Bureau of Narcotics Enforcement; the Riverside County Sheriff's Office; the Riverside District Attorney's Office; the Indio Police Department; the Palm Springs Police Department; the Desert Hot Springs Police Department; the California State Parole Board; and the Riverside County Probation Department. Also participating in Operation Clean House were Internal Revenue Service - Criminal Investigation Division, the Drug Enforcement

Administration and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

In addition to the arrests, task force members yesterday seized more than 50 guns, methamphetamine, a live pipe bomb, \$15,000 in cash and several vehicles.

The main case, which charges a total of 13 defendants (one is currently a fugitive), was filed in United States District Court in Riverside earlier this week and unsealed yesterday. A fourteenth federal defendant was arrested during Thursday morning's takedown and is expected to be charged in a federal criminal complaint later today. All but one of the defendants is charged in a conspiracy to manufacture, distribute and possess of narcotics. The case primarily involves methamphetamine, but heroin and other narcotics also were sold during the investigation.

During yesterday's operation, three people were arrested on state charges, ranging from weapons offenses to drug offenses.

The defendants arrested yesterday in the federal case are:

- Jose Chavez Huerta, 42, of Thermal, who is allegedly the highest-ranking member of the Mexican Mafia in the Coachella Valley. Because of Huerta's position, Latino gang members in the Coachella Valley are expected to abide by his orders and to pay him "taxes" – portions of their profits from drug trafficking. Huerta, in turn, is required pay "taxes" or "insurance" to his Mexican Mafia "sponsor," Richard Aguirre, who is serving a life term at Pelican Bay State Prison.
- Jovita Aguirre, 75, of Pico Rivera. Jovita Aguirre is the mother of Richard Aguirre and she allegedly collected "taxes" on behalf of her son, as well as relaying messages to and from him. Jovita Aguirre is charged with conspiring to launder money.
- Rodolfo Baldemar Zuniga, 26, of Thermal, who allegedly delivered drugs on behalf of Huerta.
- Chris Huerta, 24, of Thermal, who allegedly distributed narcotics.
- Maria Carmen Huerta (Jose Huerta's wife), 28, of Thermal.
- Chad Wayne Baringer, 32, who is currently in state custody and who

allegedly sought permission from Jose Huerta to sell narcotics.

- Joe Huerta (who is believed to be Jose Huerta's brother), 27, of Coachella.
- Ernest Julian Sanchez, 37, who is accused of trafficking in methamphetamine and conspiring with Huerta in his organization.
- Alicia Rodriguez, 35, of Montclair, who allegedly collected "tax" payments on behalf of another Mexican Mafia member;
- James Angle, 31, of Coachella, who is accused of conspiring with Tony Rodriguez.
- Oscar Bustos, 32, who is currently in a Riverside County jail and is accused of conspiring with Tony Rodriguez.
- Franchesca Martina Ochoa, 29, of Thermal, who allegedly helped Huerta with his operation.

There is one fugitive in the case: Tony Rodriguez, 36, of Indio, who allegedly is the second-highest Mexican Mafia member in the Coachella Valley.

The thirteenth federal defendant arrested yesterday was Juan Carlos Rosas, who is expected to be charged with narcotics offenses later today.

For the past 10 months, the task force has been investigating Huerta and his drug trafficking network. Using informants, wiretaps and controlled purchases of narcotics, investigators learned of Tony Rodriguez's senior position in the organization. According to the criminal complaint, Huerta and Tony Rodriguez control narcotics trafficking in the Coachella Valley on behalf of the Mexican Mafia. They each allegedly also run their own extensive narcotics distribution rings. The Latino street gangs they control regularly pay "taxes," in the form of proceeds from narcotics sales, to Huerta and Tony Rodriguez, who in turn pay taxes to their Mexican Mafia sponsors. Huerta and Tony Rodriguez enforce the Mexican Mafia's control over the region by threats and actual physical force, including home invasion robberies, assaults and murders, including of inmates in prison, according to the complaint.

The Mexican Mafia, which is commonly called Eme or La Eme, is a Latino gang that operates throughout the California State prison system, as well as in federal prisons and on the streets in the United States and Mexico. Previous

federal cases in Southern California have targeted the Mexican Mafia with racketeering charges.

Ten of the defendants arrested yesterday are scheduled to appear this afternoon in United States District Court in Los Angeles. Yesterday afternoon in federal court in Los Angeles, Aguirre and Alicia Rodriguez appeared before a United States Magistrate Judge. Aguirre was ordered detained pending another hearing on Wednesday. Alicia Rodriguez will be released today and will be subject to home detention with electronic monitoring.

An indictment contains allegations that a defendant has committed a crime. Every defendant is presumed to be innocent until proven guilty in court.

“Thanks to the cooperation of the many federal, state and local law enforcement officers involved in this operation, yesterday’s takedown has struck a significant blow against one of Southern California’s most notorious gangs, La Eme, and those whom it would enlist to engage in narcotics trafficking on its behalf,” according to Acting United States Attorney George S. Cardona. “As a result of today’s takedown, and the accompanying seizures of drugs and firearms, the Coachella Valley is a little bit safer. We all will continue to work together to disrupt and dismantle gangs that engage in violence and narcotics trafficking, whether here in the Coachella Valley, or elsewhere in this District.

J. Stephen Tidwell, Assistant Director in Charge of the FBI in Los Angeles, stated: "The arrests represent the FBI's pledge to combat violent gangs by applying federal resources to help clean up the drug trafficking and criminal activity plaguing the Coachella Valley at the direction of the Mexican Mafia. This type of impact can only be made as a result of the collaborative efforts of agencies represented at the federal, state and local levels of law enforcement."

Jean Divine, Assistant Special Agent in Charge of IRS-Criminal Investigation’s Los Angeles Office, said: “IRS-Criminal Investigation is a proud participant in our nation’s war on drugs and gang violence. Our agent’s financial expertise complements narcotics and gang investigations by aiding in the disruption and dismantling of drug trafficking organizations. Yesterday’s enforcement actions in the Coachella Valley are a testament to the success of a

multi-agency approach in drug investigations. In this instance, all of the agencies brought their combined expertise to bear to successfully bring these drug traffickers to justice.”

California Attorney General Edmund G. Brown Jr. stated: “The task force did an extraordinary job of shutting down another violent gang and this demonstrates the value of state, local and federal cooperation.”

John A. Torres, Special Agent in Charge of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives in Los Angeles, commented: “ATF’s primary focus remains protecting the public and reducing violent crime. We will continue investigating the origin of the guns seized yesterday and will exhaust all leads.”

Riverside Sheriff Bob Doyle said: “This operation was successful because all of the law enforcement agencies on the federal level, along with our Coachella Valley Gang Task Force, our Special Enforcement Bureau and everyone involved in this mission, worked together as a team to take these dangerous criminals off the street. FBI leadership on this mission was excellent and their entire team deserves to be commended for a job well done. We have dealt a big blow to gangs operating in our county and across the county.”

Riverside County District Attorney Rod Pacheco commented: “This operation reflects the great collaborative working relationship between the Department of Justice, district attorney and local law enforcement toward support of federal prosecution. We're proud to be a part of this team.”

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