



NEWS RELEASE

OPERATION ROADRUNNER

March 24, 2005

Cloned stolen vehicles and identity theft pose a serious threat to the nation by organized criminal groups and potential terrorists

Operation Roadrunner highlights the importance for Homeland Security initiatives and cross border cooperation on vehicles. This two-year investigation of organized criminal groups interacting on cloned stolen vehicles and identity theft reached far beyond Florida into at least 14 additional states, including ties to suspects in smuggling narcotics, grow houses, and one subject was arrested for an outstanding homicide case in Miami-Dade County. Two suspects in this organized criminal enterprise were operating from federal prison and one from the Miami-Dade County jail

In October 2003, Miami-Dade Auto Theft Task Force detectives and the Florida Attorney General's Office of the Statewide Prosecutor, with assistance from the U.S. Immigrations and Customs Enforcement, launched an investigation into the Ferrer organized crime group in Florida. This case of cloned stolen vehicles and identity theft led to a distribution network operating throughout the United States.

May 2004, the first rounds of arrests were made under state statutes of Racketeering and Conspiracy to Commit Racketeering. Arrested were Rafael Ferrer, Antonio Ferrer, of Miami-Dade, William Fuentes, of Louisville, Kentucky, Daryous Kangarani of Las Vegas, Nevada and Sean McClinton of Virginia Beach, Virginia.

This second round of charges for Racketeering and Conspiracy to Commit Racketeering include Carlos Ponce (who is currently incarcerated in Miami-Dade County jail), Jorge Luis Valdes, Francisco Sabilla, of Miami-Dade, Richard Wershe Jr., Lorenzo Nichols Jr. and Lorenz Nichols Sr. Richard Wershe Jr. and Lorengo Nichols Sr. are currently incarcerated in a federal prison for other criminal acts. The investigation is continuing and further arrests are expected.

The investigation has identified over 250 vehicles valued at approximately \$8 million that have been stolen and sold with altered vehicle identification numbers and paperwork. To date, over 21 suspects have been arrested on various state charges and 119 vehicles have been recovered with an approximate value of \$3.5 million. This group would target and take high-end vehicles including Hummer H2s and Escalades.

Cloned vehicles and identity theft are a growing and significant problem throughout the United States, Canada and Mexico. The lack of an integrated registration system allows criminal groups to "clone" vehicle identification numbers (VIN) from vehicles in multiple states and countries at one time. The suspects in this investigation utilized cloned numbers from the United States and even Canada to conceal the stolen vehicles. These vehicles are sought by smuggling operations to make it difficult for law enforcement to link vehicles to them. Worldwide, stolen/altered vehicles are being utilized by terrorist organizations in vehicle bombs. The crime can have a significant impact on investigations, making it more difficult or impossible to identify suspects.

In the United States, two vehicle bombs, one at the World Trade Center in 1993 and the other in the Oklahoma City Bombing in 1995, involved vehicles that were quickly identified. If these vehicles had been altered with cloned numbers, investigators may not have been able to make timely arrests. Clearly, with this system online, it would save lives and assist in the prevention of these acts.

More recently, during a raid on an Abu Musab al-Zarqawi command center in Fallujah, an SUV registered in Texas was found being converted into a bomb (CBS News November 19, 2004). Sunday, March 13, 2005, Time Magazine wrote that reports indicated that al-Zarqawi seeks to strike "soft targets" in the United States by smuggling vehicles through the US – Mexican border. Just citing these two examples shows that to be able to accurately identify a vehicle is a global issue.

Auto theft costs the citizens of the United States over \$8 billion annually (NICB Press Release, February 28, 2005). Without the ability to clone vehicles and obtain "legitimate" titles, stolen vehicles could not be resold for a high profit that organized groups now reap. In 1992, the US Congress passed the Title II of the Anti-Car Theft Act requiring the establishment of the National Motor Vehicle Title Information System (NMVTIS), to be on-line by January of 1996.

This system will integrate information from all 50 states of the US so that the registration processing of vehicles cannot be cloned and titles "washed" of information such as damage claims. The NMVTIS project is still ongoing but is currently facing a funding issue to become fully operational. The American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators (AAMVA) has the responsibility for managing and implementing the system. AAMVA is working to secure funding and to integrate the system with Canada and Mexico. Funding this system is important to fighting organized crime, and providing homeland security in North America.

The success of this investigation was due to the efforts of members from the Miami-Dade Police Department, the Miami-Dade Multi-Agency Auto Theft Task Force, the Florida Attorney General's Office of Statewide Prosecutor, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Immigrations and Customs Enforcement, the Federal Bureau of Prisons, the Federal Highway Patrol, the Florida Division of Motor Vehicles, the Miami-Dade State Attorney's Office, the National Insurance Crime Bureau, the Hialeah Gardens Police Department and the Miami-Dade Correction's Department. In addition, a number of local, county, and state agencies, specifically the Louisville Police Department, the Arizona Department of Public Safety, the New York City Police Department, the Virginia Beach Police Department, the California Highway Patrol, the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department, the Phoenix Police Department, the Detroit Police Department and the Georgia Division of Motor Vehicles provided assistance and conducted their own investigations related to this case.

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