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US Cracks Down on Street Gang, Makes Scores of Arrests

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U.S. law enforcement officials say they have arrested more than 100 members of a violent U.S. street gang with roots in Central America.

The gang is known as MS-13, which stands for Mara Salvatrucha. MS-13 was originally based in El Salvador, but spread to the United States in the late 1980's, when refugees who fled the country's civil war began to settle in California.

In the past few weeks, federal agents have arrested 103 suspected MS-13 gang members in several cities, including New York, Washington, Los Angeles, and Miami.

This latest gang crackdown is being coordinated by the Department of Homeland Security. Assistant Homeland Security Secretary Michael Garcia briefed reporters in Washington. "We will not tolerate this violent brutality and criminal activity in our communities, and, with our local partners, we are taking action on that message," he said. Today, 103 dangerous individuals, roughly half of whom have arrests or convictions for violent criminal behavior, are off the streets, and will no longer be a threat to those communities, or in the United States."

MS-13 is considered one of the largest organized street gangs in the United States, and is notorious for its violence. Many of those arrested in recent weeks have prior convictions for a range of crimes including murder, assault and arson, as well as weapons- and drug-possession offenses.

Homeland Security official Michael Garcia says many of those arrested are in the country illegally. "We have incredible immigration authority, customs authority under one roof (Department of Homeland Security) now, and we are able to bring that to the table (use against gangs). As I said, a number of MS-13 (members are) foreign born. That gives us an opening, an opportunity to use our immigration authorities particularly, our financial authorities as well, to get into the gang and disrupt their activities," he said.

Some law enforcement officials have speculated that MS-13 might team up with al-Qaida to pose a threat inside the United States. Michael Garcia says he is not aware of any hard evidence of a link between the two organizations. But he does say that federal officials view MS-13 as an emerging security threat, not just another criminal gang.

The United States has been deporting suspected gang members to El Salvador since the early 1990's. Law enforcement officials estimate that there could be up to 10,000 MS-13 members in the United States.

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Law enforcement agencies in the United States have arrested nearly 600 alleged gang members as part of a nationwide crackdown on illegal gangs in the past two weeks. Michael Chertoff (file photo)U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security Michael Chertoff announced the arrests, saying street gangs in America have grown and expanded...

