Raid targets Mongols motorcycle gang

By Scott Glover
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Dozens are arrested on federal racketeering charges after a multi-agency investigation. Federal agents also want to seize the Mongols' trademarked name: 'We're going after their very identity.'

After the arrests of 61 members of the Mongols biker gang on federal racketeering charges Tuesday, U.S. Atty. Thomas P. O'Brien stood in front of two dozen gleaming motorcycles seized from the gang and vowed to go after more than just the Mongols' means of transportation.

In what he called an unprecedented move, O'Brien said he would seek to take control of the Mongols' name, which the gang has trademarked, through a restraining order barring them from using it.

"We're going after their very identity," O'Brien said.

Tuesday's crackdown involved more than 1,000 federal agents and police in Southern California, Nevada, Oregon, Colorado, Washington and Ohio.

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It capped a three-year undercover investigation in which federal agents infiltrated the gang, resulting in an 86-count indictment.

"We believe [the indictment] puts a stake in the heart of the Mongols," said Michael Sullivan, acting director of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, who joined O'Brien and other law enforcement officials at a news conference in downtown Los Angeles.

The 177-page indictment describes a mostly Latino gang, intolerant of African Americans, whose attacks were sometimes motivated by race.

In addition to racketeering, the Mongols are charged with committing violent crimes - including murder -- drug trafficking, weapons offenses and money laundering. They used guns, knives, brass knuckles, lead pipes and steel-toed boots to impose their will, often on such rivals as the Hells Angels, but also on unsuspecting members of the public who happened to cross their paths.

The indictment, the first three pages of which list 79 gang member defendants with menacing monikers such as "Monster," "Danger" and "Violent Ed," is drawn largely from the observations of four undercover ATF agents who penetrated the gang and four current Mongols members who became paid informants for the government. Investigators also relied heavily on wiretapped telephone calls in which Mongols, usually speaking in coded language, discussed the gang's allegedly criminal operations.

On display at the news conference were the motorcycles, Mongols' leather jackets and a cache of weapons. Authorities also seized nearly 7 pounds of methamphetamines, five LAPD badges and at least $153,000 in cash.

The key to the investigation -- dubbed Operation Black Rain -- was the work of the undercover agents who spent several years gaining the Mongols' trust, officials said. Before being admitted to the gang, they were checked out by a private investigator who had been hired by the Mongols and they were given polygraph exams.

The Mongols were formed in the 1970s by a small group of Latinos who reportedly had been rejected by the Hells Angels. The gang now has between 500 and 600 members, the vast majority of them in Southern California, according to law enforcement officials.

The gang has a constitution and bylaws and some of the trappings of more conventional organizations -- its members are provided cellphones, for example.

Decisions regarding membership, dues collection and club policy are made by leaders known in the gang as the "Mother Chapter." They have a headquarters in downtown Los Angeles.

As with many organizations, patches are awarded to signify the status or achievements of its members, though the behavior celebrated by the Mongols differs from most. For instance, a skull and crossbones patch or one proclaiming "Respect Few, Fear None" is given to members who commit murder or other acts of violence on behalf of the gang, according to the indictment. One member was given permission to have the gang's insignia tattooed on his head for having shot two members of a rival street gang last year, the indictment alleges.

There also are patches associated with the gang's alleged sexual rituals. Members are awarded wings of varying colors for engaging in sex acts with women at prearranged "wing parties," the indictment states. For example, members who have sex with a woman with venereal disease are given green wings, according to the indictment.

The Mongols fund their organization largely through the sale of methamphetamine, according to the indictment.

Undercover agents documented dozens of alleged drug deals ranging in quantity from a few grams to half a kilo.

Many of the alleged sales were made to undercover agents or confidential informants cooperating with authorities, the indictment states.

But violence seemed to be at the heart of the Mongols' existence.

One undercover agent said he was told early in his effort to infiltrate the gang that he "must be willing to kill and die for the Mongols if he wanted to join the organization."

Much of the violence described in the indictment involved clashes between the Mongols and their longtime rivals, the Hells Angels.

Mongols are accused of tangling with the Hells Angels at a Laughlin, Nev., casino in
2002, at a Toys for Tots motorcycle run in 2005 and at a Chuck E. Cheese in San Diego last year. Two Hells Angels and one Mongol were killed in the Nevada casino incident, the indictment alleges.

But the violence was not limited to disputes between warring gangs; some were motivated by race, but others appeared to be random acts.

Two Mongols, known as "Villain" and "Danger," are accused of beating a man to death with a pool cue in a Lancaster nightclub on Valentine's Day last year because he had been bad-mouthing the gang.

Another member is accused of shooting patrons of a Riverside bar and then trying to run them over in the parking lot, also in 2007.

A Mongol known as "Dago Bull" told an undercover agent that he and two fellow Mongols tortured a man in 2006 by breaking his knuckles with pliers and one of his knees with a metal pipe.

Another member boasted of having beaten a man so badly that he knocked out a tooth, which he kept taped to his microwave as a souvenir.

A Mongol known as "Monster" and two other members are accused of beating a black man at a Hollywood bar in 2006 while shouting racial slurs, the indictment states.

Other members allegedly beat and repeatedly stabbed a Latina whom they saw in the company of a black man.

Some of the defendants face potential life sentences in federal prison if convicted.

Most made their initial court appearances Tuesday. Others were expected to appear before federal magistrates today.

O'Brien said the restraining order he is seeking would prohibit the Mongols from wearing anything with that name, which is typically accompanied by an insignia of a pony-tailed, Genghis Khan-like figure riding a chopper.

Anyone caught wearing Mongols apparel could have it seized by police on the spot, he said.

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