LOS ANGELES (Reuters) - Federal officials on Tuesday charged eight people with several crimes related to the illegal theft, copying and Internet distribution of hit movie, "Star Wars: Episode III -- Revenge of the Sith."

The movie, which was the final installment made in the lucrative series of "Star Wars" films by director George Lucas, debuted in theaters worldwide to huge media fanfare in May.

But before it ever opened, an illegally made copy could be downloaded from the Internet, and that copy was traced back to an editing facility in Lakewood, California.

The charges come as moviemakers wage a battle against illegally copying and distributing movies on video, DVD and the Internet. Hollywood's studios claim they lose $3.5 billion in annual revenue due to piracy and are worried about losing billions more if swapping films on the Web becomes common.

The U.S. Attorney in Los Angeles filed a copyright infringement charge against Albert Valente, 28, of Lakewood, California, for taking the "Star Wars" copy from the post-production house where he worked. He has pleaded guilty, the U.S. Attorney's office said in a statement.

Six others were charged with copyright infringement and other misdemeanors for copying and distributing the "Star Wars" film that Valente took.

One defendant, Marc Hoaglin, 36, of Huntington Beach, California, was charged with a felony for putting the movie on the Web where it could be downloaded by anybody. Hoaglin could face up to as much as three years in jail.

Separately, the U.S. Attorney also charged Ronald Redding, 37, of Linthicum Heights, Maryland, with misdemeanor copyright infringement for giving away his "screener" copy of "Million Dollar Baby," which was sent to him for Academy Awards voting. He agreed to plead guilty, the U.S. Attorney said.
Finally, Eric Wright, 43, of Bellflower, California, has pleaded guilty to one count in trafficking in counterfeit DVD labels for films such as "The Incredibles" and "Friday Night Lights." He faces up to five years in a federal prison.

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