

Millions Seized in Phoenix-Area Gambling Raid

Millions of dollars in cash, cars and property were seized and 31 people arrested in raids that authorities said broke up four illegal gambling rings operating in three states.

Undercover deputies had infiltrated the rings operating in Phoenix, Los Angeles and Las Vegas, Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio said. Bettors placed wagers over the Web, while bookies, collectors and loan sharks operated out of Phoenix-area bars and restaurants.

„When you play poker, that’s for amusement,“ Arpaio said Tuesday. „This is not for amusement. This is to make money, to make money illegally. That’s what this organization is all about.“

Arpaio said millions of dollars were being collected, and sometimes extorted, from bettors calling toll-free numbers and visiting online sites based in Costa Rica.

Those who couldn’t pay their debts were paying interest rates as high as 51 percent.

Threats of violence weren’t uncommon, Arpaio said. Some bettors even gave up their homes and lost their retirement funds.

In smashing the gambling ring, sheriff’s officials said they expect to collect USD 145 million in illegal assets. They said racketeering liens are expected to be placed on numerous homes and businesses and 120 local bank accounts frozen.

The cash exchanges took place at several Phoenix-area bars and restaurants, but those businesses were not participating in the gambling ring, officials said.

Edgardo Olivas, manager of Venice Ristorante Italiano, said sheriff's deputies were waiting for him when he arrived at the Ahwatukee restaurant Tuesday morning.

„I was surprised to see them,“ Olivas said. „I sat and talked with them. All I can say is I don't know anything about it.“

Those taken into custody Tuesday face charges that include the promotion of gambling, money laundering, conspiracy and extortion.