

Homeland Security targets child predators

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WASHINGTON — The agency created to combat terrorism now is targeting those who prey on children.

Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge announced "Operation Predator" yesterday. The initiative seeks to crack down on crimes by child predators by pulling together once-fragmented investigative and intelligence resources.

It will target illegal aliens and foreign nationals who have avoided deportation.

"The protection of our most vulnerable citizens, our children, is a critical component of our mission," Ridge said. "Harming a child in any manner or form is a despicable, despicable thing."

An initial weeklong nationwide sweep that ended June 30 rounded up 89 foreigners. They had been convicted

of sex offenses but had evaded law enforcement efforts to remove them from the country.

"The welcome mat to our nation has been pulled," Ridge said.

The department's Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement is leading the operation. It will draw on Internet sources, intelligence, investigation and detention and removal functions of the bureau to pursue those who exploit children.

The Homeland Security Department, created following the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, has mostly focused on terrorism. Ridge said the department will collaborate with the FBI, the Justice Department and other agencies that traditionally have tracked child predators.

Now that immigration and customs officials are all housed under the Homeland Security Department, Ridge said

the new initiative would take advantage of those resources to better protect children.

Operation Predator includes a single Web portal to access all publicly available state Megan's Law databases, which track sex offenders.

The program will also help law enforcement identify exploited youngsters in child porn cases with a new national child victim identification system. In addition, the bureau plans to partner with the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children to exchange information on missing kids and chase new investigative leads.

The bureau will notify foreign governments of any aliens with a history of sexual offenses being deported to their countries and will seek information from governments on anyone with a history of sexual offenses seeking entry into the United States.