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Police: Video Gambling Ring Crushed

■ Asian organization based in Westminster had installed illegal machines in cafes, often against owners' will, authorities say.

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TIMES STAFF WRITERS

Federal and local authorities Thursday said they have dismantled the county's largest Asian organized crime syndicate, a Little Saigon-based operation that supplied the majority of illegal gambling machines in the county.

In a predawn raid culminating "Operation Wildcard," authorities arrested 15 people.

The alleged gang leader, Son Thanh Nguyen, 32, was already in custody on a weapons charge. Nguyen, authorities said, masterminded a sophisticated operation that installed in cafes "stealth" video games that offer illegal gambling with the flip of a switch.

The machines are fixtures in the majority of Little Saigon's Vietnamese cafes, according to authorities, and also proliferate in outlying cities. Gang members, they said, often preyed on merchants and threatened those

who refused to allow them to set up the machines.

"I truly believe that the Little Saigon community will be a better place to live," said FBI Supervisory Special Agent Randy D. Parsons. "The syndicate was involved in a significant amount of loan sharking, Ecstasy trafficking as well as illegal gambling."

Local police said they are heartened by the arrests because they believe the gambling attracted other crime to the city, including loan sharking and extortion. The FBI believes the gang received more than \$300,000 a year from the video machines alone, although police privately believe the number may have reached the millions.

The crackdown is part of a larger effort to curtail organized crime emanating from Little Saigon. The gang's criminal activities, police said, were typical of other gangs whose reach extends across states, and sometimes worldwide. Westminster Police Chief James Cook said the problem is so serious that the department has an investigator in Vietnam.

"Because of the refugee settlement in our city, the Little Saigon area, the tentacles of crime from that area spread out across the country and around the world," Cook said.

The arrests cap a one-year FBI investigation that used wiretaps and community sources to infiltrate the syndicate, most of

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