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## **23 arrested in Hemet crime probe**

**Dozens of searches are made as officers investigate attacks on police, city property.**

By Robert J. Lopez and Andrew Blankstein, Los Angeles Times

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A Riverside County task force arrested 23 people Tuesday after serving search warrants at dozens of locations as part of an investigation into attacks by a suspected white supremacist group against Hemet police, according to law enforcement authorities.

The operation by a local, state and federal task force took the suspects into custody on suspicion of narcotics, weapons and parole violations, the Hemet Police Department said.

The arrests follow what police said were a series of calculated attacks against officers and city property in the Inland Empire city, a place once favored as a slow-paced retirement community before its crime rate started to inch up.

Hemet Police Capt. Dave Brown said some of the 23 men and women arrested have gang affiliations. But citing the ongoing investigation, he declined to specify whether the suspects were involved with street gangs, prison gangs, motorcycle gangs or white supremacist groups.

A law enforcement source familiar with the probe said task force members believe the attacks — including booby traps set at police facilities and the torching of several city vehicles — appear to be the work of a white supremacist gang.

"We think right now it's tied to a supremacist group .... That's where we're leaning," said the source, who asked not be named because the case is ongoing.

Brown said task force members targeted locations they believe are connected to the attacks. But he cautioned that authorities were still interviewing the suspects Tuesday evening and had not determined whether they took part in the recent string of incidents.

The operation began early Tuesday as more than 200 law enforcement officers fanned out to 35 locations, each believed connected to the attacks, police said. All those taken into custody were adults.

The task force includes members of the Hemet Police Department; the Riverside County district attorney's office; the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives; and the FBI. Members seized about 16 weapons, along with other evidence, officials said.

Last month, authorities arrested 33 alleged members of the [Vagos motorcycle gang](#). After the operation, Riverside County Dist. Atty. Rod Pacheco said in an interview that the Vagos were "an extreme threat to law enforcement."

Authorities launched the massive crackdown against the motorcycle gang because they considered its members a threat against law enforcement. None of the members, however, were named as suspects in the recent string of attacks on officers. Some were arrested on drug and weapons charges, and, as of last week, less than half of those arrested had been formally charged.

Beverly Hills attorney Joseph Yanny, who represents the Vagos and some of its members, said Tuesday that none of the 33 arrested were Vagos members. He also said the group was not involved in the attacks against police.

"As far as I'm concerned, this is nothing but politics," Yanny said. "They know none of the people arrested were Vagos."

In response to the attacks, the [Hemet City Council](#) approved an emergency resolution last week to award \$165,000 in no-bid contracts to "harden" Police Department headquarters and City Hall with buffers including Plexiglas shields and surveillance equipment.

In recent months, the attacks have involved booby traps set at the headquarters of the Hemet-San Jacinto Valley Gang Task Force, officials said. In December, a utility line was redirected to fill the offices with gas. Officials said a spark could have triggered a devastating explosion.

In February, a "zip gun" was hidden by the gate to the task force office and rigged to fire. When a gang officer opened the gate, the weapon went off and the bullet narrowly missed him, authorities said.

In early March, police said, a "dangerous" device was found near the unmarked car of a task force member. That was followed by an arson attack on four city code enforcement trucks March 23.

Authorities were also investigating whether an early-morning fire last week at a Hemet police shooting range was another attack. The fire at the remote training facility off Warren Road broke out shortly after 2 a.m. Much of the building was destroyed.