



Department of Justice

United States Attorney George S. Cardona
Central District of California

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
THURSDAY, AUGUST 9, 2007
www.usdoj.gov/usao/cac

CONTACT: Thom Mrozek
PHONE: (213) 894-6947
thom.mrozek@usdoj.gov

NINE CHARGED IN SEX TRAFFICKING RING WHERE MINORS WERE SMUGGLED FROM GUATEMALA AND FORCED TO WORK AS PROSTITUTES IN L.A. AREA

Victims As Young As 13 Were Promised Jobs, then Suffered Threats and Beatings

Six members of a Guatemalan family and three associates have been indicted for their roles in a sex trafficking ring that recruited young women in Guatemala with false promises of high-paying jobs, smuggled the victims into the United States, and forced them to work as prostitutes to pay smuggling fees.

A federal grand jury in Los Angeles yesterday returned a 50-count second superseding indictment, which was unsealed today following the arrest of a new defendant involved in the sex trafficking scheme. The superseding indictment, which replaces charges first filed in December 2006 (see: <http://www.usdoj.gov/usao/cac/news/pr2006/174.html>), adds allegations of sex trafficking of minors; sex trafficking by force, fraud or coercion; violations of the Mann Act, which prohibits interstate or foreign transport of minors for prostitution; and importing and harboring aliens for purposes of prostitution.

The indictment details alleged abuses of the women including guarding the victims to prevent their escape; threats of violence to the women and of harm to their families in Guatemala; and beatings to coerce and force the victims into working. According to the indictment, leaders of the conspiracy sometimes helped each other by selling a victim to another defendant who could better control her and by jointly beating a victim who had tried to run away.

“The crimes alleged in this case involve the exploitation for personal gain of young girls rendered vulnerable by their age and desire for a better life,” said United States Attorney George S. Cardona. “The defendants played on these vulnerabilities to operate a highly organized trafficking ring in the very heart of Los Angeles for several years, counting on their victims’ fears to prevent their discovery. We hope these charges address these fears by demonstrating that, with the help of the Human Trafficking task force that has been established here in Los Angeles, we will work quickly to protect those who step forward to reveal such rings, and will prosecute those responsible.”

The nine defendants named in the second superseding indictment are:

- Gladys Vasquez Valenzuela, 36;
- Mirna Jeanneth Vasquez Valenzuela, aka Miriam, 26;
- Maria De Los Angeles Vicente, aka Angela, 28;
- Albertina Vasquez Valenzuela, aka Christina, 49;
- Maribel Rodriguez Vasquez, a new defendant;
- Gabriel Mendez, 33;
- Luis Vicente Vasquez, 31;
- Flor Morales Sanchez, 33, a new defendant, and;
- Pablo Bonifacio, 30.

Morales Sanchez was arrested this morning and is expected to make her first court appearance this afternoon. Rodriguez Vasquez has been a fugitive since the prostitution ring was first dismantled last year. The remaining seven defendants have been held without bond since December 2006.

“The defendants in this case are accused of dreadful crimes including luring desperate women to the U.S. with false promises only to enrich themselves by forcing their victims into prostitution and slavery. The FBI and our partners with the Human Trafficking Task Force in Los Angeles are dedicated to finding victims of human trafficking, who endure horrific abuse under appalling conditions, and to finding those responsible for their suffering,” said J. Stephen Tidwell, the Assistant Director in Charge of the FBI’s Los Angeles Office.

The investigation into the sex trafficking ring began after a source came forward and contacted authorities in October 2006. Two victims were liberated by law enforcement

authorities in November. Additional victims were rescued and seven of the defendants were taken into custody in December.

The second superseding indictment discusses 12 victims who were forced to work as prostitutes, five of whom were minors.

According to the indictment in this case, the victims were approached in Guatemala, where most of them were promised high-paying legitimate jobs in the United States. After being smuggled across the United States-Mexico border and driven to Los Angeles, the women were turned over to the defendants, who informed them that they would have to work as prostitutes to pay off their smuggling debts. When the women protested, they were told they had no choice. The victims allegedly endured frequent threats of violence to themselves and to their families in Guatemala, as well as physical abuse. To further coerce the victims to work as prostitutes, defendants allegedly brought the victims to “witch doctors,” who told the young females that curses would be placed on them and their families if they ran away. In one incident detailed in the indictment, three of the defendants repeatedly kicked and hit one of the victims to punish her for trying to escape.

“These young women were enticed into coming to this country by promises of the American dream, only to arrive and discover that what awaited was a nightmare,” said Robert Schoch, special agent in charge for the ICE office of investigations in Los Angeles. “The filing of sex trafficking charges in this case underscores ICE's resolve to work with its law enforcement partners to ensure that those who engage in this reprehensible form of exploitation are brought to justice.”

An indictment contains allegations that a defendant has committed a crime. Every defendant is presumed to be innocent until proven guilty in court.

The investigation into the alien smuggling ring was conducted by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, the U.S. Department of Labor - Office of Inspector General and the Los Angeles Police Department, all of which are participants in the Los Angeles Human Trafficking Task Force. The case is being jointly prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorney Caroline C. Wittcoff, (213) 894-2393, and Department of Justice Trial Attorney Cyra O’Daniel of the Civil Rights Division.