



U.S. Department of Justice

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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PRESS RELEASE

FORMER OWNER AND MANAGER OF LONG ISLAND CATERING HALL
INDICTED FOR FORCED LABOR AND VISA FRAUD

Defendants Allegedly Forced Immigrants to Work Without Proper Pay at the Thatched
Cottage

A six-count indictment was unsealed today in federal court in Central Islip, New York, charging Ralph Colamussi and Roberto Villanueva with conspiring to engage in forced labor of immigrants and visa fraud, as well as related substantive counts, fraud in foreign labor contracting and fraudulent inducement of aliens to enter and remain in the United States in violation of law. Both defendants were arrested this morning and will be arraigned this afternoon before United States Magistrate Judge Anne Y. Shields.

Bridget M. Rohde, Acting United States Attorney for the Eastern District of New York, Angel M. Melendez, Special Agent-in-Charge, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), Homeland Security Investigations (HSI), Thomas M. Cioppa, District Director, United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), and Michael Mikulka, Special Agent-in-Charge, U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Inspector General (DOL-OIG), announced the charges.

“As alleged, Colamussi and Villanueva lured immigrants from the Philippines to the United States with false promises regarding jobs and overtime pay in order to line their own pockets at the expense of the victims,” stated Acting United States Attorney Rohde. “This Office, together with our law enforcement partners, will hold accountable those who engage in such illegal, exploitive behavior.”

“This case is an example of ruthless labor trafficking hiding in plain sight. These individuals allegedly committed visa fraud while forcing people to work in their catering hall under horrible conditions, in what seemed to be an inescapable situation,” stated HSI Special Agent-in-Charge Melendez. “It is important for anyone who may believe they are a victim of trafficking to know that our investigations are victim-centered, focusing on keeping the victim safe while bringing their traffickers to justice.”

“USCIS played a meaningful role in bringing suspects of this inhumane criminal activity to face justice,” said USCIS New York District Director Cioppa. “Supporting cases like these is an important way USCIS fulfills key parts of our mission: safeguarding the integrity of our immigration system and securing the homeland.”

“An important function of the Office of Inspector General is to investigate allegations of fraud related to the Department of Labor's administration of the H-2B Visa program,” stated DOL-OIG Special Agent-in-Charge Mikulka. “We will continue to proactively work with our law enforcement partners to investigate these types of allegations.”

At the time of the events alleged in the indictment, Colamussi was the owner and operator of Thatched Cottage, a popular catering and wedding venue in Centerport, New York, as well as the owner and operator of the Jellyfish Restaurant, a popular bar located next door to the Thatched Cottage. As alleged in the indictment, between approximately August 2008 and March 2013, Villanueva and Colamussi recruited prospective employees in the Philippines with false promises of jobs with overtime pay, as waiters, servers, cooks, chefs and food preparation. The prospective employees were illegally made to pay the defendants money in advance in order to qualify for the visa interview in the United States and directed to conceal such payments from the United States Department of State during visa interviews. Workers were not only brought to the United States by means of fraudulent promises of specific employment, but upon arrival, were forced to work at lower than promised wages without overtime. The workers were also forced to care for Colamussi's relatives, including his father, and to perform construction work at the Jellyfish Restaurant.

Workers were brought to the United States on H-2B visas that expired shortly after their arrival in the United States. Once their H-2B visas expired, workers were allegedly told by Colamussi and Villanueva to apply for student visas and to fraudulently represent that they intended to attend school full-time and had sufficient resources to support themselves during school. Colamussi and Villanueva, at times, deposited funds in the workers' bank accounts to give the appearance of resources and then withdrew the funds once the student visas were approved. The workers continued to work for Colamussi and Villanueva during the term of their student visas, attending school one day a week.

When the workers objected to performing certain jobs or working consecutive shifts, Colamussi and Villanueva threatened to report them to immigration authorities. Colamussi had many workers whose visas had expired living in the basement of his home in East Northport, New York, and working for him off the books.

The charges contained in the indictment are merely allegations, and the defendants are presumed innocent unless and until proven guilty.

If convicted, Colamussi and Villanueva face a maximum term of imprisonment of 20 years for forced labor and conspiracy to commit forced labor, 10 years for visa fraud and fraud in foreign labor contracting, and five years for conspiracy to commit visa fraud and inducement of an alien to illegally enter and reside in the United States. Defendants also face forfeiture of all proceeds and the house in East Northport where the immigrants lived in the basement.

The government's case is being handled by the Office's Long Island Criminal Division. Assistant United States Attorney Charles P. Kelly is in charge of the prosecution with the assistance of Assistant United States Attorney Madeline O'Connor of the Office's Civil Division, which is responsible for the forfeiture of assets.

The Defendant:

RALPH COLAMUSSI

Age: 61

East Northport, New York

ROBERTO VILLANUEVA, also known as "Bobby,"

Age: 60

Residence: Manila, Philippines

E.D.N.Y. Docket No. 17-CR-0592 (DRH)