



THE UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT of JUSTICE

Acting United States Attorney David H. Estes
Southern District of Georgia

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Photo courtesy of U.S. Attorney's Office, Southern District of Georgia

David H. Estes, Acting U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of Georgia, speaks during a news conference Nov. 22, 2021, to announce indictments in USA v. Patricio et al, Operation Blooming Onion, a human trafficking investigation naming 24 defendants on felony charges including human smuggling and document fraud. With Estes are (from left) Katrina Berger, Special Agent in Charge of the Atlanta Office of Homeland Security Investigations; Michael Imperatrice, Resident Agent in Charge, Savannah HSI Office; Jessica Moore, Chief of the Criminal Investigation Division for the U.S. Department of State's Diplomatic Security Service; Rafiq Ahmad, Special Agent in Charge of the Atlanta Regional Office of the

U.S. Department of Labor Office of Inspector General; Henry Deblock, Savannah Area Port Director for U.S. Customs and Border Protection; George "Will" Clarke, Supervisory Senior Resident Agent, FBI Savannah; John Britt, Savannah/Jacksonville Team Leader, U.S. Postal Inspection Service; David Lyons, U.S. Marshal for the Southern District of Georgia; Maj. Fred Cole, Chief Deputy of the Coffee County Sheriff's Office; and Capt. Marcus Dunlap, Coffee County Sheriff's Office.

Human smuggling, forced labor among allegations in south Georgia federal indictment

Newly unsealed documents target 24 defendants for human trafficking

WAYCROSS, GA: Two dozen defendants have been indicted on federal conspiracy charges after a transnational, multi-year investigation into a human smuggling and labor trafficking operation that illegally imported Mexican and Central American workers into brutal conditions on South Georgia farms.

The newly unsealed, 54-count indictment in *USA v. Patricio et al.* details felony charges resulting from Operation Blooming Onion, an Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Forces (OCDETF) investigation. The multi-agency investigation, led by Homeland Security Investigations and other federal agencies, spans at least three years, and the 53-page indictment documents dozens of victims of modern-day slavery while spelling out the illegal acts that brought these exploited workers into the United States and imprisoned them under inhumane conditions as contract agricultural laborers, said David H. Estes, Acting U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of Georgia.

“The American dream is a powerful attraction for destitute and desperate people across the globe, and where there is need, there is greed from those who will attempt to exploit these willing workers for their own obscene profits,” said Acting U.S. Attorney Estes. “Thanks to outstanding work from our law enforcement partners, Operation Blooming Onion frees more than 100 individuals from the shackles of modern-day slavery and will hold accountable those who put them in chains.”

“OCDETF Operation Blooming Onion maximized the expertise of multiple law enforcement agencies and leveraged analytical and coordination support from OCDETF’s International Organized Crime Intelligence and Operations Center (IOC-2) to target an international criminal organization engaged in human trafficking and visa fraud,” said OCDETF Director Adam W. Cohen. “The U.S. Attorney’s Office’s leadership of this multi-agency law enforcement effort positions us to disrupt and dismantle the operations of transnational criminal networks that pose the greatest threat to our communities and to the Nation.”

As described in the indictment, investigators from Homeland Security Investigations, the U.S. Department of Labor, U.S. Department of State’s Diplomatic Security Service, the U.S. Postal Inspection Service, and the FBI began investigating the

Patricio transnational criminal organization in November 2018. The indictment alleges that in or before 2015, the conspirators and their associates “engaged in mail fraud, international forced labor trafficking, and money laundering, among other crimes,” fraudulently using the H-2A work visa program to smuggle foreign nationals from Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras into the United States under the pretext of serving as agricultural workers.

The activities took place within the Southern, Middle, and Northern Districts of Georgia; the Middle District of Florida; the Southern District of Texas; and Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and elsewhere. The conspirators required the workers to pay unlawful fees for transportation, food, and housing while illegally withholding their travel and identification documents, and subjected the workers “to perform physically demanding work for little or no pay, housing them in crowded, unsanitary, and degrading living conditions, and by threatening them with deportation and violence.”

Exploitation of the workers included being required to dig onions with their bare hands, paid 20 cents for each bucket harvested, and threatened with guns and violence to keep them in line. The workers were held in cramped, unsanitary quarters and fenced work camps with little or no food, limited plumbing and without safe water. The conspirators are accused of raping, kidnapping and threatening or attempting to kill some of the workers or their families, and in many cases sold or traded the workers to other conspirators. At least two of the workers died as a result of workplace conditions. In the Southern District of Georgia, these activities were alleged to have taken place in the counties of Atkinson, Bacon, Coffee, Tattnall, Toombs and Ware as farmers paid the conspirators to provide contract laborers.

The conspirators are alleged to have reaped more than \$200 million from the illegal scheme, laundering the funds through cash purchases of land, homes, vehicles, and businesses; through cash purchases of cashier’s checks; and by funneling millions of dollars through a casino.

Then, as the continuing investigation into the conspiracy moved forward in late 2019, the indictment alleges that three of the conspirators attempted to intimidate and persuade a witness to lie to a federal grand jury and deny any knowledge of the illegal activities of the Patricio organization.

More than 200 law enforcement officers and federal agents from around the United States convened in the Southern District of Georgia to execute more than 20 federal search warrants at target locations.

Those indicted in *USA v. Patricio et al.* and their charges include:

- **Maria Leticia Patricio**, 70, of Nichols, Ga., charged with Conspiracy to Commit Mail Fraud; two counts of Mail Fraud; Conspiracy to Engage in Forced Labor; and Conspiracy to Commit Money Laundering;

- **Daniel Mendoza**, 40, of Ruskin, Fla., charged with Conspiracy to Commit Mail Fraud; Conspiracy to Engage in Forced Labor; and Conspiracy to Commit Money Laundering;
- **Nery Rene Carrillo-Najarro**, 56, Douglas, Ga., charged with Conspiracy to Commit Mail Fraud; Conspiracy to Engage in Forced Labor; 14 counts of Forced Labor; and Conspiracy to Commit Money Laundering;
- **Antonio Chavez Ramos**, a/k/a “Tony Chavez,” 38, a citizen of Mexico illegally present in the United States, charged with Conspiracy to Commit Mail Fraud; Conspiracy to Engage in Forced Labor; four counts of Forced Labor; and Conspiracy to Commit Money Laundering;
- **JC Longoria Castro**, 46, Vidalia, Ga., charged with Conspiracy to Commit Mail Fraud; Conspiracy to Engage in Forced Labor; four counts of Forced Labor; and Conspiracy to Commit Money Laundering;
- **Victoria Chavez Hernandez**, 38, a citizen of Mexico illegally present in the United States, charged with Conspiracy to Commit Mail Fraud; Conspiracy to Engage in Forced Labor; and Conspiracy to Commit Money Laundering;
- **Enrique Duque Tovar**, 36, of Axon, Ga., charged with Conspiracy to Commit Mail Fraud; Conspiracy to Engage in Forced Labor; nine counts of Forced Labor; and Conspiracy to Commit Money Laundering;
- **Jose Carmen Duque Tovar**, 58, of Axon, charged with Conspiracy to Commit Mail Fraud; Conspiracy to Engage in Forced Labor; nine counts of Forced Labor; and Conspiracy to Commit Money Laundering;
- **Charles Michael King**, 31, of Waycross, Ga., charged with Conspiracy to Commit Mail Fraud; Conspiracy to Engage in Forced Labor; and Conspiracy to Commit Money Laundering;
- **Stanley Neal McGauley**, 38, of Waycross, charged with Conspiracy to Commit Mail Fraud; Conspiracy to Engage in Forced Labor; and Conspiracy to Commit Money Laundering;
- **Luis Alberto Martinez**, a/k/a “Chino Martinez,” 41, of Tifton, Ga., charged with Conspiracy to Commit Mail Fraud; Conspiracy to Engage in Forced Labor; and Conspiracy to Commit Money Laundering;
- **Delia Ibarra Rojas**, 33, of Lyons, Ga., charged with Conspiracy to Commit Mail Fraud; Conspiracy to Engage in Forced Labor; three counts of Forced Labor; and Conspiracy to Commit Money Laundering;

- **Juana Ibarra Carrillo**, 46, of Alma, Ga., charged with Conspiracy to Commit Mail Fraud; Conspiracy to Engage in Forced Labor; and Conspiracy to Commit Money Laundering;
- **Donna Michelle Rojas**, a/k/a “Donna Lucio,” 33, of Collins, Ga., charged with Conspiracy to Commit Mail Fraud; Conspiracy to Engage in Forced Labor; three counts of Forced Labor; and Conspiracy to Commit Money Laundering;
- **Margarita Rojas Cardenas**, a/k/a “Maggie Cardenas,” 43, of Reidsville, Ga., charged with Conspiracy to Commit Mail Fraud; Conspiracy to Engage in Forced Labor; three counts of Forced Labor; Conspiracy to Commit Money Laundering; and Tampering with a Witness;
- **Juan Fransisco Alvarez Campos**, 42, a citizen of Mexico illegally present in the United States, charged with Conspiracy to Commit Mail Fraud; Conspiracy to Engage in Forced Labor; and Conspiracy to Commit Money Laundering;
- **Rosalvo Garcia Martinez**, a/k/a “Chava Garcia,” 33, of Haines City, Fla., charged with Conspiracy to Commit Mail Fraud; Conspiracy to Engage in Forced Labor; and Conspiracy to Commit Money Laundering; and Tampering with a Witness;
- **Esther Ibarra Garcia**, 63, of Dade City, Fla., charged with Conspiracy to Commit Mail Fraud; Conspiracy to Engage in Forced Labor; three counts of Forced Labor; and Conspiracy to Commit Money Laundering;
- **Rodolfo Martinez Maciel**, 26, a citizen of Mexico illegally present in the United States, charged with Conspiracy to Commit Mail Fraud; Conspiracy to Engage in Forced Labor; three counts of Forced Labor; and Conspiracy to Commit Money Laundering;
- **Brett Donovan Bussey**, 39, of Tifton, Ga., charged with Conspiracy to Commit Mail Fraud; four counts of Mail Fraud; Conspiracy to Engage in Forced Labor; Conspiracy to Commit Money Laundering; and Tampering with a Witness;
- **Linda Jean Facundo**, 36, of Tifton, charged with Conspiracy to Commit Mail Fraud; Conspiracy to Engage in Forced Labor; and Conspiracy to Commit Money Laundering;
- **Gumara Canela**, 34, of Alma, charged with Conspiracy to Commit Mail Fraud; Conspiracy to Engage in Forced Labor; 14 counts of Forced Labor; and Conspiracy to Commit Money Laundering;

- **Daniel Merari Canela Diaz**, 24, a citizen of Mexico illegally present in the United States, charged with Conspiracy to Commit Mail Fraud; Conspiracy to Engage in Forced Labor; and Conspiracy to Commit Money Laundering; and,
- **Carla Yvonne Salinas**, 28, of Laredo, Texas, charged with Conspiracy to Commit Mail Fraud; Conspiracy to Engage in Forced Labor; and Conspiracy to Commit Money Laundering.

The charges of Conspiracy to Engage in Forced Labor, and Forced Labor, each carry statutory penalties of up to life in prison, while the charges of Conspiracy to Commit Mail Fraud, Mail Fraud, Money Laundering Conspiracy, and Tampering with a Witness each carry statutory penalties of up to 20 years in prison. Each of the charges also include substantial financial penalties and periods of supervised release after completion of any prison term. There is no parole in the federal system.

Criminal indictments contain only charges; defendants are presumed innocent unless and until proven guilty.

The case was investigated under the Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Forces (OCDETF) operation. OCDETF identifies, disrupts, and dismantles the highest-level criminal organizations that threaten the United States using a prosecutor-led, intelligence-driven, multi-agency approach. Operation Blooming Onion also is designated as a Priority Transnational Organized Crime Cases.

Agencies investigating Operation Blooming Onion include Homeland Security Investigations; U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, Fraud Detection and National Security; the U.S. Department of Labor Office of Inspector General, and Wage and Hour Division; U.S. Department of State's Diplomatic Security Service; the FBI; the U.S. Postal Inspection Service; and the U.S. Marshals Service, with assistance from the Georgia National Guard; the Georgia Bureau of Investigation; the Georgia State Patrol; the Coffee County Sheriff's Office; the Chatham County Sheriff's Office; the Tattnall County Sheriff's Office; the Bacon County Sheriff's Office; and the Tift County Sheriff's Office. The case is being prosecuted for the United States by Assistant U.S. Attorney and Human Trafficking Coordinator Tania D. Groover, and Assistant U.S. Attorney and Criminal Division Deputy Chief E. Greg Gilluly Jr., and Assistant U.S. Attorney Xavier A. Cunningham, Section Chief of the Asset Recovery Unit.

If you believe you have information about a potential trafficking situation call the National Human Trafficking Hotline at 1-888-373-7888. Anti-Trafficking Hotline Advocates are available 24/7 to take reports of potential human trafficking. All reports are confidential and you may remain anonymous. Interpreters are available. The information you provide will be reviewed by the National Hotline and

forwarded to specialized law enforcement and/or service providers where appropriate.

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