

**Department of Justice**

U.S. Attorney's Office

Middle District of Florida

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Tuesday, September 27, 2022

## **Owner Of Farm Labor Contracting Company Pleads Guilty In Racketeering Conspiracy Involving The Forced Labor Of Mexican Workers**

WASHINGTON —Bladimir Moreno, 55, pleaded guilty in federal court in Tampa, Florida, to charges of conspiracy under the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) Act and conspiracy to commit forced labor. A federal grand jury in the Middle District of Florida had previously returned a six-count indictment against multiple defendants for their roles in a federal racketeering conspiracy that victimized Mexican H-2A workers who, between 2015 and 2017, had worked in the United States harvesting fruits, vegetables and other agricultural products. The announcement was made by Assistant Attorney General Kristen Clarke for the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division and U.S. Attorney Roger Handberg for the Middle District of Florida.

“The scheme these defendants employed trapped the victims through fear of serious harm if they did not continue to toil away for the defendants’ profit,” said Assistant Attorney General Kristen Clarke for the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division. “The Department of Justice is committed to combatting human trafficking in all its forms, including prosecuting agricultural employers who break the law to subject their vulnerable migrant farm workers to forced labor.”

“Forcing individuals to work against their will using abusive and coercive tactics is not only unconscionable but illegal,” said U.S. Attorney Roger Handberg for the Middle District of Florida. “We will continue to work with our human trafficking task forces to stamp out these illegal practices throughout our district and state.”

According to court documents, Moreno owned, operated, and managed Los Villatoros Harvesting (LVH), a farm labor contracting company, that functioned as a criminal enterprise compelling victims to work in Florida, Kentucky, Indiana, Georgia and North Carolina. After charging Mexican farm workers exorbitant sums to come into the United States on short-term, H-2A, agricultural visas to work for LVH, Moreno and his co-conspirators coerced over a dozen workers into providing long hours of physically demanding agricultural labor, six to seven days a week, for de minimis pay. Moreno and his co-conspirators used various coercive means, including imposing debts on workers; confiscating the workers’ passports; subjecting workers to crowded, unsanitary and degrading living conditions; verbally abusing and humiliating the workers; threatening workers with arrest, jailtime and deportation; isolating workers by preventing them from interacting with anyone other than LVH employees; and threatening to physically harm the workers’ family members back in Mexico if the workers failed to comply with their demands. In addition to conspiring to subject H-2A workers to forced labor, Moreno and his coconspirators also harbored H-2A workers in the United States after their visas had expired for financial gain and committed visa fraud and fraud in foreign labor contracting.

Earlier this year, three co-defendants who had worked for Moreno and assisted him in operating LVH pleaded guilty to related offenses. First, Christina Gamez, 43, a U.S. citizen, who worked for LVH as a bookkeeper, manager and supervisor, pleaded guilty to RICO conspiracy. Second, Efrain

Cabrera Rodas, 32, a citizen of Mexico, who worked for LVH as a recruiter, manager and supervisor, also pleaded guilty to RICO conspiracy. Third, Guadalupe Mendes Mendoza, 45, a citizen of Mexico, who worked for LVH as a manager and supervisor, pleaded guilty to conspiring to obstruct a federal investigation.

The Palm Beach County Human Trafficking Task Force, which includes the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Homeland Security Investigations, and the Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office, investigated the case. The Task Force received assistance from the Department of Labor (DOL) Office of the Inspector General, the DOL Wage and Hour Division, the Department of State Diplomatic Security Service, and Coalition of Immokalee Workers, Colorado Legal Services Migrant Farm Worker Division, Legal Aid Services of Oregon Farmworker Program and Indiana Legal Services Worker Rights and Protection Project.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Ilyssa Spergel for the Middle District of Florida and Trial Attorneys Avner Shapiro, Maryam Zhuravitsky, and Matthew Thiman of the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division are prosecuting the case.

Anyone who has information about human trafficking should report that information to the National Human Trafficking Hotline toll-free at 1-888-373-7888, which is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. For more information about human trafficking, please visit [www.humantraffickinghotline.org](http://www.humantraffickinghotline.org). Information on the Department of Justice's efforts to combat human trafficking can be found at [www.justice.gov/humantrafficking](http://www.justice.gov/humantrafficking).

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