

**Department of Justice**  
U.S. Attorney's Office  
Southern District of Georgia

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## **Three men sentenced to federal prison on charges related to human trafficking**

### **Each admitted to role in forced farm labor in Operation Blooming Onion**

**BRUNSWICK, GA:** Three men have been sentenced to federal prison in separate but related cases in which they admitted providing forced labor for south Georgia farms.

**Javier Sanchez Mendoza Jr.**, 24, of Jesup, Ga., was sentenced to 360 months in federal prison after pleading guilty to Conspiracy to Engage in Forced Labor; **Aurelio Medina**, 42, of Brunswick, was sentenced to 64 months in prison after pleading guilty to Forced Labor; and **Yordon Velazquez Victoria**, 45, of Brunswick, was sentenced to 15 months in prison after pleading guilty to Conspiracy, said David H. Estes, U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of Georgia. Mendoza and Medina are citizens of Mexico illegally present in the United States and are subject to deportation after completion of their prison terms.

There is no parole in the federal system.

“These men engaged in facilitating modern-day slavery,” said U.S. Attorney Estes. “Our law enforcement partners have exposed an underworld of human trafficking, and we will continue to identify and bring to justice those who would exploit others whose labors provide the fuel for their greed.”

The cases were charged as part of the Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force investigation, Operation Blooming Onion, which tracked a wide-ranging conspiracy to bring farm workers from Central America into the United States under the H-2A visa program under fraudulent pretenses and to profit from their labor by underpaying the workers and keeping them in substandard conditions. The case has been designated as a Priority Transnational Organized Crime Case under the OCDETF program.

As described in court documents and testimony, Mendoza admitted that from about August 2018 to November 2019, in Glynn, Wayne, and Pierce counties, he was a leader in a venture to obtain and provide labor and services for farms and other businesses. He did so by recruiting and unlawfully charging more than 500 Central American citizens to obtain H-2A visas – specifically granted for temporary agricultural labor – and then withholding the workers’ identification papers and threatening them and their families in their home countries to force them to work for little or no pay and in deplorable conditions.

A key victim testified during sentencing that Mendoza selected her from another work crew after her arrival in Georgia from Mexico and brought her to live with him, maintaining control through threats and intimidation and raping her repeatedly for more than a year – including deceiving her into believing she had married him. When she escaped, he kidnapped her at knifepoint from a home where she was babysitting children who were playing in their front yard. Law enforcement agencies tracked her to Mendoza’s Jesup mobile home, where after her rescue the officers found a shrine to Santa Muerte – “Saint Death” – decorated with her hair and blood in what was believed to be a

prelude to her murder. Mendoza faces pending state charges for aggravated assault related to that incident.

Medina admitted that from about April to October 2020, in Glynn and Effingham counties, he charged foreign workers to obtain H-2A visas and then withheld their identification documents. Victoria, a naturalized U.S. citizen, admitted he conspired with Medina and allowed Medina to use his name to apply for the use of H-2A workers, and then transported those workers from housing to work for which Victoria was paid \$600 per week.

The investigation into forced labor in agricultural communities, in south Georgia and beyond, continues through *U.S.A. v. Patricio et al*, in which 23 defendants are charged in the labor trafficking, visa fraud and money laundering conspiracy. The defendants are awaiting trial and are presumed innocent unless and until proven guilty. Two of those defendants are fugitives.

“These defendants are being held accountable for the horrors of human and labor trafficking that they inflicted upon their victims, in the name of profit,” said Special Agent in Charge Katrina Berger, who oversees Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) operations in Georgia and Alabama. “Thanks to the great work done by our agents, along with our state, local and federal partners, this case was successfully investigated and prosecuted preventing more innocent people from being victimized.”

“Customs and Border Protection takes great pride in fostering collaboration with our partner government agencies to diligently combat human trafficking and forced labor as part of our overall duties and responsibilities in protecting and preserving our national security,” said Henry DeBlock III, Area Port Director for CBP Savannah.

“This sentencing sends a strong message: DSS pursues those who fraudulently use worker visas, like the H-2A, for personal gain, making sure that those who commit human trafficking face consequences for their criminal actions,” said Jessica Moore, chief of the criminal investigations division of the U.S. Department of State’s Diplomatic Security Service (DSS). “We are firmly committed to working to prevent situations where vulnerable individuals are exploited in human trafficking schemes such as this. DSS’ global presence and strong relationship with the U.S. Attorney’s Office and other law enforcement partners was essential in the pursuit of justice for these victims.”

“Mendoza, Medina and Victoria misused the H-2A program in order to enrich themselves at the expense of foreign workers and American employers,” said Mathew Broadhurst, Acting Special Agent-in-Charge, Atlanta Region, U.S. Department of Labor Office of Inspector General. “We will continue to work with our law enforcement partners and the U.S. Department of Labor’s Wage and Hour Division to vigorously pursue those who commit fraud involving foreign labor programs.”

“The United States abolished slavery and involuntary servitude over 156 years ago, yet these men engaged in the heinous crime of forced labor and chose to exploit their fellow human beings for profit,” said Philip Wislar, Acting Special Agent in Charge of FBI Atlanta. “The FBI is committed to working with our partners to pursue justice on behalf of victims of human trafficking and prosecuting perpetrators to the fullest extent of the law.”

“This investigation is an excellent example of a partnership between federal, state and local law-enforcement agencies working together to bring down individuals involved in a human trafficking conspiracy,” said Tommy D. Coke, Inspector in Charge of the Atlanta Division. “The hard work and countless hours put forth by all has prevented so many victims from being further victimized by the defendants who have caused considerable emotional harm.”

The cases are being investigated as part of an 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.

Agencies investigating the cases include Homeland Security Investigations; Customs and Border Protection; 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 U.S. Postal Inspection Service; and the FBI. The cases are 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.

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Human Trafficking  
Immigration  
Human Smuggling  
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