

Ex-lawmen sentenced in bribery, trafficking case

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A former Yuma Sector Border Patrol agent and a former officer with the Arizona State Department of Corrections have been sentenced to lengthy prison terms in connection to charges of bribery, drug trafficking and plotting a murder.

On Tuesday, former Border Patrol agent Ivhan Herrera-Chiang, 31, and former AZDOC officer Michael Lopez-Garcia, 30, were sentenced by U.S. Senior District Court Judge Paul G. Rosenblatt to prison terms of 15 years and 9 years, respectively, for their involvement in a plot to provide sensitive information to drug traffickers and to arrange for the murder of a government informant. Both defendants had previously pleaded guilty to various charges arising from the scheme.

“You have done about the worst thing a law-enforcement agent could do, especially a Border Patrol agent,” Rosenblatt said during the sentencing in Phoenix.

First Assistant U.S. Attorney Elizabeth A. Strange agreed.

“These defendants engaged in a profound betrayal of the public trust. The U.S. Attorney’s Office, working with our law enforcement partners, will continue to strive to ensure the integrity of every officer entrusted with the safety of the public. These sentences send a powerful message that we will not tolerate corruption within the law enforcement ranks.”

As acknowledged in their plea agreements, the defendants formed a “criminal partnership” to earn money by helping traffickers smuggle drugs and illegal immigrants into the United States. As part of this multi-year partnership, Lopez-Garcia, who worked for the Arizona State Prison Complex in San Luis, personally smuggled nearly 2 pounds of methamphetamine into the country by hiding the drugs under his prison guard uniform as he crossed through the Port of Entry. He also attempted to smuggle 30 kilograms of cocaine into the country.

Herrera-Chiang assisted Lopez-Garcia, in return for bribes, by providing him with sensitive information -- including sensor maps, combinations to gates located near the Mexican border, computer records concerning prior drug seizures, and the location of Border Patrol units -- to which Herrera had access by virtue of his employment as a Border Patrol agent.

Herrera-Chiang also helped Lopez-Garcia smuggle his relatives into the United States illegally from Mexico.

During the final stages of the partnership, Lopez-Garcia attempted to arrange for the murder of a government informant after becoming fearful the informant might be able to provide incriminating information about his activities. As part of this plan, Lopez-Garcia obtained

confidential information concerning the informant's identity from Herrera-Chiang and then relayed this information to his Mexican trafficking associates.

"What began as a drug smuggling investigation quickly became more complex when HSI special agents learned a federal agent was misusing his position of trust to facilitate the commission of crimes," said Matt Allen, special agent in charge of ICE Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) Arizona.

"While his actions are atypical of the dedication and integrity demonstrated by the vast majority of those who serve, this sentence should nonetheless send a message about the serious consequences facing those who would exploit their positions and violate that special trust."

Following the sentencing, Douglas G. Price, FBI Special Agent in Charge for the Phoenix Division, said "when those who are entrusted to uphold the law choose to betray the trust of the American people by committing bribery and drug trafficking, it tarnishes the badge of those who honorably serve and protect our country. Today's sentencing illustrates that justice was served in this matter. The FBI will continue to work with law enforcement partners to combat public corruption at all levels."

The lengthy sentences "are very appropriate given their egregious crimes," added IRS Criminal Investigation Special Agent in Charge Dawn Mertz. "When those entrusted to uphold the law sink to the level of criminals they pursue for financial gain, it is a sad day for those of us in the law enforcement community."

The investigation in this case was conducted by the Department of Homeland Security-Office of Inspector General, Homeland Security Investigations, Homeland Security Investigations-OPR, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Customs and Border Protection-Office of Internal Affairs, and the Internal Revenue Service, Criminal Investigation. The prosecution was handled by Dominic Lanza, Assistant U.S. Attorney, District of Arizona, Phoenix.