

Four Indicted for Money Laundering in Prolific Human Smuggling Network Takedown

Friday, July 28, 2023

For Immediate Release

Office of Public Affairs

A federal grand jury in the Southern District of Texas has returned a superseding indictment charging four defendants with conspiracy to launder money.

The new charges were filed against Erminia Serrano Piedra, aka Irma, aka Boss Lady, 32, of Elgin, Texas; Oscar Angel Monroy Alcibar, aka Pelon, 40, also of Elgin; Pedro Hairo Abrigo, 34, of Killeen, Texas; and Juan Diego Martinez-Rodriguez, aka Gavilan, 38, of Dale, Texas.

As alleged in the superseding indictment, the defendants conspired to engage in financial transactions designed to conceal the nature, location, source, ownership, and control of ill-gotten proceeds of illicit human smuggling and the unlawful harboring and transportation of undocumented aliens. The leaders of the organization allegedly recruited and used straw persons to accept human smuggling proceeds in their bank accounts and then transferred these proceeds to the leaders under the pretense of "work" payments for construction. The defendants also allegedly used businesses and business accounts to transfer the human smuggling proceeds. In addition, the defendants allegedly recruited individuals to accept human smuggling proceeds in the form of cash in exchange for checks from the recruited individuals' business bank accounts.

The superseding indictment also notices the criminal forfeiture of three properties with values currently estimated at approximately \$2.275 million, \$515,000, and \$344,000, as well as money judgments amounting to at least \$2,945,027.

Three of the four defendants previously were charged with human smuggling in an indictment filed in the Southern District of Texas and unsealed on Sept. 13, 2022. That indictment was the culmination of a significant enforcement operation to disrupt and dismantle an alleged prolific human smuggling organization operating in Texas and elsewhere. That operation resulted in the arrests of 14 alleged human smugglers alleged to be members of a human smuggling organization led by Piedra that facilitated the unlawful transportation and movement of hundreds of migrants within the United States and harbored and concealed those migrants from law enforcement detection. The migrants were

citizens of Mexico, Guatemala, and Colombia, and they or their families allegedly paid members of the human smuggling organization to help them travel unlawfully to and within the United States. According to the indictment, the human smuggling organization used drivers to pick up migrants near the U.S.-Mexico border and transport them into the interior of the United States, often harboring them at “stash houses” along the way in locations such as Laredo and Austin, Texas. Drivers for the human smuggling organization allegedly hid migrants in suitcases placed in pickup trucks and crammed migrants in the back of tractor-trailers, covered beds of pickup trucks, repurposed water tankers, and wooden crates strapped to flatbed trailers. These methods allegedly placed the migrants’ lives in danger, because they were frequently held in confined spaces with little ventilation, which became overheated, and they were driven at high speeds with no vehicle safety devices.

Assistant Attorney General Kenneth A. Polite, Jr. of the Justice Department’s Criminal Division, U.S. Attorney Alamdar S. Hamdani for the Southern District of Texas, and Executive Associate Director Katrina W. Berger of Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) made the announcement.

HSI Laredo, along with Customs and Border Protection’s (CBP) U.S. Border Patrol Laredo Sector and Department of Homeland Security Office of Inspector General (DHS-OIG), led the investigation and received substantial assistance from HSI offices in Austin, San Antonio, Waco, and Corpus Christi, Texas; HSI New Orleans; HSI Gulfport, Mississippi; HSI Mobile, Alabama; HSI West Palm Beach, Florida; HSI’s Human Smuggling Unit in Washington, D.C.; CBP’s National Targeting Center; the U.S. Marshals Service; Immigration and Customs Enforcement’s Enforcement and Removal Operations – Austin; and the Treasury Executive Office for Asset Forfeiture. Police departments in Laredo, Killeen, Elgin, and Round Rock, Texas; the Wiggins, Mississippi Police Department; the Bogalusa, Louisiana Police Department; the Webb County Constable’s Office; the Webb County District Attorney’s Office; sheriffs’ offices in Webb, Bastrop, and Caldwell Counties in Texas; sheriffs’ offices in Harrison, George, and Stone Counties in Mississippi; the Mobile County, Alabama Sheriff’s Office; sheriffs’ offices in Jefferson and Washington Parishes in Louisiana; the Mississippi Bureau of Narcotics; and the Louisiana State Police also provided substantial assistance.

Trial Attorneys Christian Levesque and Angela Buckner of the Criminal Division’s Human Rights and Special Prosecutions Section (HRSP), Trial Attorney Daria Andryushchenko of the Criminal Division’s Money Laundering and Asset Recovery Section (MLARS), and Assistant U.S. Attorney Jennifer Day for the Southern District of Texas are prosecuting the case, with substantial assistance from MLARS Financial Investigator Kelly O’Mara, the Criminal Division’s Office of Enforcement Operations’ (OEO) Electronic Surveillance Unit (ESU), and ESU Acting Deputy Chief Jessica Reid.

The indictments against these defendants were brought under Joint Task Force Alpha (JTFA). Attorney General Merrick B. Garland created JTFA in June 2021 in partnership with DHS to strengthen the department’s overall efforts to combat these crimes based on the rise in prolific and dangerous smuggling emanating from Central America and impacting our border communities. JTFA’s goal is to disrupt and dismantle those human smuggling and trafficking networks operating in El Salvador,

Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico, with a focus on networks that endanger, abuse or exploit migrants, present national security risks, or engage in other types of transnational organized crime.

Since its creation, JTFA has successfully increased coordination and collaboration between the Justice Department, DHS, and other interagency law enforcement participants, and with foreign law enforcement partners, including in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico; targeted those organizations who most significantly impact the United States; and coordinated significant smuggling indictments and extradition efforts in U.S. Attorneys' Offices across the country. To date, JTFA's work has resulted in over 100 domestic and international arrests of leaders, organizers, and significant facilitators of human smuggling; several dozen convictions; significant jail sentences imposed; and substantial asset forfeiture. JTFA is comprised of detailees from U.S. Attorneys' Offices along the southwest border, including the Southern District of Texas, Western District of Texas, District of New Mexico, District of Arizona, and Southern District of California. Numerous components of the Justice Department's Criminal Division are part of JTFA, led by HRSP, and including the Office of Prosecutorial Development, Assistance, and Training, the Narcotic and Dangerous Drug Section, MLARS, OEO, the Office of International Affairs, and the Organized Crime and Gang Section. JTFA is made possible by substantial law enforcement investment from DHS, FBI, the Drug Enforcement Administration, and other partners.

An indictment is merely an allegation. All defendants are presumed innocent until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt in a court of law.

Updated July 28, 2023