

NEWS RELEASE



OFFICE OF THE UNITED STATES ATTORNEY SOUTHERN DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA

San Diego, California

***United States Attorney
Karen P. Hewitt***

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For Immediate Release

Two Former Border Patrol Agents Charged With Smuggling Aliens Are Arrested In Mexico

NEWS RELEASE SUMMARY - October 20, 2008

San Diego, CA - United States Attorney Karen P. Hewitt announced today the unsealing of an 18-count indictment against two former United States Border Patrol (BP) agents, Raul Villarreal and Fidel Villarreal, as well as Claudia Gonzalez and Armando Garcia. On October 18, 2008, former BP agents Raul and Fidel Villarreal were arrested, along with Armando Garcia and Claudia Gonzalez, in Tijuana, Mexico, pursuant to provisional arrest warrants based on felony charges pending in United States District Court for the Southern District of California. All defendants are charged with conspiracy to bring in illegal aliens for financial gain, multiple counts of bringing in illegal aliens for financial gain, conspiracy to launder money, conspiracy to tamper with a witness, witness tampering, and criminal forfeiture. The Villarreals are charged with receiving bribes by public officials; Armando Garcia and Claudia Gonzalez are also charged with bribery of a public official. The indictment was handed up by a federal grand jury sitting in San Diego in April 2008 and unsealed today.

According to the indictment, the defendants ran an alien smuggling organization to bring illegal aliens into the United States from Mexico for money. Claudia Gonzalez and Armando Garcia allegedly bribed BP agents Raul Villarreal and Fidel Villarreal not to perform their duties of enforcing the immigration laws of the United States. The indictment alleges that on multiple occasions in 2005 and 2006, Armando Garcia led groups of aliens into the United States by walking them across the border at locations other than the ports of entry. Raul Villarreal and Fidel Villarreal then picked up the aliens using their official Border Patrol vehicles and released the aliens in furtherance of their illegal entry into the United States. The Villarreals are also charged with conspiring with Claudia Gonzalez and Armando Garcia to launder money and tamper with witnesses.

United States Attorney Hewitt said, “The United States Attorney’s Office shall prosecute all public officials willing to sell their offices for bribes. These two former Border Patrol agents are charged with smuggling aliens while on duty, conspiring with others to smuggle aliens, laundering money, and tampering with witnesses. Those who betray their offices and the public trust will find this office’s pursuit of justice thorough, unrelenting, and uncompromising.”

“This lengthy criminal investigation underscores ICE's top-notch commitment to fight public corruption and dismantle criminal smuggling rings, no matter where they run to,” said Miguel Unzueta Special Agent in Charge for ICE investigations in San Diego. “No one should ever think they can get away with exchanging their entrusted law enforcement position for a underground criminal enterprise, or use that position to allow, rather than prevent, smugglers to operate along the U.S. Mexico border.”

Richard L. Skinner, Inspector General of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), Office of Inspector General (OIG) said, “The men and women of the Border Patrol continue to enjoy an outstanding and professional reputation as our country's first line of defense of our international borders. Their work increases our country’s border security and national security. The OIG will continue its commitment to work with our law

enforcement partners to identify and aggressively investigate all allegations of corruption to protect our borders and the integrity of DHS personnel, programs, and operations.”

San Diego Sector Border Patrol Deputy Chief Richard Barlow said, “Border Patrol agents perform their duties daily with honor and professionalism. We take an Oath of Office to protect this country against all enemies, foreign or domestic, and will not tolerate any misconduct or criminal behavior. I commend the men and women of the San Diego Sector Border Patrol for their dedicated service and vigilance, while protecting America.”

The United States will seek the defendants’ extradition to the United States to stand trial on the charges in the indictment.

DEFENDANTS

Case Number: 08CR1332-JAH

Raul Villarreal
Fidel Villarreal
Armando Garcia
Claudia Gonzalez

SUMMARY OF CHARGES

Conspiracy to Bring in Illegal Aliens for Financial Gain — Title 18, United States Code, 371

Maximum penalties: 5 years’ imprisonment and \$250,000 fine

Bringing in illegal aliens for financial gain – Title 8, United States Code, Sections 1324(a)(2)(B)(ii)

Maximum penalties: 10 years’ imprisonment and \$250,000 fine

Bribery – Title 18, United States Code, Sections 201(b)(2)(A) and (C)

Maximum penalties: 15 years’ imprisonment and greater of \$250,000 fine or three times the amount of the bribe

Conspiracy To Launder Money – Title 18, United States Code, Sections 1956(a)(2)(A) and (h)

Maximum penalties: 20 years’ imprisonment and greater of \$500,000 fine or twice the value of the funds

Conspiracy To Tamper with a Witness – Title 18, United States Code, Section 1512(k)

Maximum penalties: 10 years’ imprisonment and \$250,000 fine

Witness Tampering – Title 18, United States Code, Sections 1512(a)(3)(C)

Maximum penalties: 10 years’ imprisonment and \$250,000 fine

Criminal Forfeiture – Title 18, United States Code, Section 982(a)(1)

Maximum penalties: Forfeiture of proceeds

AGENCIES

Department of Homeland Security, Immigration and Customs Enforcement

Department of Homeland Security, Office of Inspector General

ICE Office of Professional Responsibility

U.S. Border Patrol

An indictment itself is not evidence that the defendants committed the crimes charged. The defendants are presumed innocent until the Government meets its burden in court of proving guilt beyond a reasonable doubt.