



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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District of Arizona*

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SEVEN MEXICAN NATIONALS CHARGED WITH HOSTAGE TAKING

PHOENIX - Seven Mexican nationals pleaded not guilty this morning before a U.S. Magistrate Judge to charges including hostage taking, possession of a firearm during a crime of violence and harboring illegal aliens for profit. On February 11, 2009, a federal grand jury in Phoenix returned a 4-count indictment against Mauricio Gerardo Aguilar-Espinoza, 25; Jorge Zaragoza-Alvarado, 24; Cesar Valentin Garcia-Aguilera, 32; Antonio Cruz-Ramirez, 19; Pedro Luna-Fuentes, 25; Oscar Daniel Hernandez-Juarez, 39; and Jaime Zamora-Martinez, 36, all citizens of Mexico.

The indictment alleges that on January 31, 2009, the defendants held smuggled aliens hostage at a house in El Mirage, Ariz., and forced the hostages to provide contact phone numbers to arrange payment of smuggling fees. The indictment also alleges that the defendants threatened to kill the hostages while brandishing a firearm, and would not release the hostages until their smuggling fees were paid. A trial date is set for April 7, 2009, before U.S. District Judge Susan R. Bolton.

The charges stem from an investigation conducted by El Mirage Police Department and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE.) According to the initial criminal complaint, an El Mirage Police Department 911 dispatcher received an emergency phone call on January 31, 2009, in which the dispatcher heard a voice in the background asking for help. Police officers were able to locate the house and, once inside, they found the seven defendants, 30 hostages, a baseball bat, a gun and a knife. The hostages told law enforcement that they had been smuggled into the United States and were being held against their will in the house until their families paid their smuggling fees. Hostages also stated that one of the defendants placed a gun to their heads and threatened to kill them, another defendant told the hostages that he would shoot them and throw them in the desert, and two other defendants struck one of the hostages with a baseball bat.

A conviction for hostage taking or possession of a firearm during a crime of violence carries a maximum penalty of life in prison, a \$250,000 fine, or both, and the harboring charge carries a maximum penalty of 10 years in prison, a \$250,000 fine, or both. In determining an actual sentence, Judge Bolton will consult the U.S. Sentencing Guidelines, which provide appropriate sentencing ranges. The judge, however, is not bound by those guidelines in determining a sentence. An indictment is simply the method by which a person is charged with criminal activity and raises no inference of guilt. An individual is presumed innocent until competent evidence is presented to a jury that establishes guilt beyond a reasonable doubt.

The investigation preceding the indictment was conducted by ICE and the El Mirage Police Department. The prosecution is being handled by Jim Knapp and Walter Perkel, Assistant U.S. Attorneys, District of Arizona, Phoenix.

CASE NUMBER: CR-09-0171-PHX-SRB
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