



**U.S. Department of Justice
U.S. Attorney's Office
Western District of Texas**

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FEDERAL JURY CONVICTS MIDLAND/ODESSA BASED BARRIO AZTECA MEMBERS

United States Attorney Robert Pitman announced that in Midland, four Midland/Odessa members of the Barrio Azteca (BA) criminal organization face up to life in federal prison after a jury convicted them this evening on federal drug and racketeering charges.

The jury returned guilty verdicts against 32-year-old Santos Almanza, 31-year-old Miguel Nieto, 40-year-old Carlos Hernandez and 36-year-old Ramon Morales for conspiring to possess with intent to distribute more than five kilograms of cocaine as well as marijuana. The jury also convicted Almanza, Nieto and Hernandez of one count of violating the Racketeering Influenced and Corrupt Organization (RICO) statute and one count of conspiracy to violate the RICO statute. During trial on Friday, 46-year-old Benito Gonzales entered a guilty plea to one count of manufacturing crack cocaine. As a result, he faces an agreed sentence of ten years in federal prison.

Testimony during the week-long trial revealed that since January 2006, the defendants have conspired to carry out the mission of the BA criminal organization through a pattern of smuggling and distributing cocaine and marijuana, robbery, extortion, as well as violence and intimidation in and around the Midland-Odessa area. Testimony also revealed that Morales and Almanza were leaders of the Midland-Odessa BA enterprise who directed other members in carrying out the mission of the organization. Jurors also heard testimony that Almanza unlawfully and knowingly attempted to murder a Midland resident on or about October 20, 2009 and that defendants Almanza, Flores, Nieto and Hernandez each agreed to commit at least two acts of racketeering activity while conducting the affairs of the criminal organization. In addition to drug distribution, the racketeering activity included a series of home invasion robberies in the Midland area.

Seven co-defendants, including 29-year-old Marcus Calderon of Midland, the self-admitted shooter in this case, await sentencing after pleading guilty to federal charges prior to trial. As for those seven defendants, potential sentences for range anywhere from five years to life in federal prison.

"These guilty verdicts send a message to those who would prey on our communities through drug trafficking and violence. For the safety of our citizens, we will continue to utilize all available resources to ensure that members of violent street gangs are held responsible for their crimes," said Joseph M. Arabit, Special Agent in Charge of the Drug Enforcement Administration-El Paso Division.

This case is being investigated by the Drug Enforcement Administration together with the Midland Police Department and the Midland County Sheriff's Office. Assistant United States Attorneys John Klassen and Mark Roomberg prosecuted this case on behalf of the Government.

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