



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

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FEDERAL JURY IN PECOS CONVICTS ALIEN SMUGGLING RINGLEADER

Vehicle accident involving smuggling operation resulted in five fatalities

United States Attorney Robert Pitman announced that 43-year-old Armando Garcia-Lopez, former resident of Tornillo, Texas, faces up to life in federal prison after a jury convicted him in connection with an undocumented alien smuggling operation which resulted in five deaths.

On Thursday, jurors found Garcia-Lopez guilty of one count of conspiracy to transport aliens resulting in death; three counts of illegal transportation of aliens resulting in death; three counts of aiding and abetting the illegal transportation of aliens; and six counts of aiding and abetting the harboring and concealing of an alien.

On April 5, 2004, Floydada, Texas, resident Melinda O'Brien died as a result of a head-on collision involving her semi-tractor trailer rig and another semi-tractor trailer rig. The accident occurred in the early morning hours on Highway 285 approximately 17 miles south of Pecos, Texas.

Testimony during the two-day trial revealed that at the time of the accident, O'Brien was traveling Northbound in the Southbound lane while transporting six undocumented aliens inside her semi-tractor trailer cab. In addition to O'Brien, three of the undocumented aliens died at the scene of the crash. A fifth individual, Paul Wesley Wilkins of Kermit, Texas, also died as a result of the initial accident when he subsequently crashed his vehicle into O'Brien's overturned trailer which could not be seen due to the weather conditions.

Evidence presented to the jury established that Garcia-Lopez recruited stash house operators and directed drivers to transport undocumented aliens. Testimony also revealed that the undocumented alien passengers in O'Brien's vehicle were directly part of Garcia-Lopez's smuggling operation.

Following the accident, in April 2004, Garcia-Lopez fled to Mexico. Seven years later, he was arrested by federal authorities in Alpine, Texas. Garcia-Lopez, who remains in custody, is scheduled to be sentenced at 2:00pm on April 16, 2012, before United States District Judge Robert Junell in Pecos.

This investigation was conducted by the Immigration and Customs Enforcement-Homeland Security Investigations agents in Fort Stockton, Alpine and El Paso with the assistance of the United States Marshals Service. It is being prosecuted for the government by Assistant United States Attorney James J. Miller, Jr.

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