

Operation leader and 10 others plead guilty in prolific human smuggling and money laundering case

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For Immediate Release

U.S. Attorney's Office, Southern District of Texas

LAREDO, Texas – A Texas woman has pleaded guilty for her role in a scheme to illegally transport hundreds of foreign nationals within the United States and conspiracy to launder proceeds of illicit human smuggling, announced U.S. Attorney Alamdar S. Hamdani.

According to court documents, Erminia Serrano Piedra aka Irma and Boss Lady, 32, conspired with at least 14 other members of a human smuggling organization Piedra led that facilitated the unlawful transportation and movement of hundreds of migrants within the United States and harbored and concealed the migrants from detection by law enforcement authorities. The migrants were citizens of Mexico, Guatemala and Colombia, and they or their families paid members of the organization to help them travel illegally to and within the United States.

The organization used drivers to pick up migrants near the U.S.-Mexico border and transport them further into the United States, often harboring the migrants at “stash houses” along the way. Drivers for the human smuggling organization used various methods to transport migrants, including by hiding them in suitcases placed in pickup trucks and by cramming migrants into tractor-trailers, covered beds of pickup trucks, repurposed water tankers and wooden crates strapped to flatbed trailers. The methods the organization used to transport migrants placed their lives in danger as they were frequently held in confined spaces with little ventilation, which became overheated, and were driven at high speeds with no vehicle safety devices. Members of the organization commonly referred to the migrants as “boxes,” “packages” or “pieces.”

Typically, the fee paid to the organization was approximately \$8,000, with \$3,000 paid upfront to smugglers in Mexico and the remainder paid once the migrants entered the United States. Payments were routed through various accounts all over the United States, and the money from those accounts was then transmitted to the leaders of the organization. According to her plea agreement, Piedra admitted to stating during the course of the conspiracy that she made a lot of money from her involvement in human smuggling and was going to continue making a lot of money in the years to

come. She also stated that she had been doing this “for a lifetime already” and was not planning to retire.

Piedra also pleaded guilty to conspiracy to engage in financial transactions designed to conceal the nature, location, source, ownership and control of ill-gotten proceeds of illicit human smuggling. The leaders of the organization recruited and utilized straw recipients to accept human smuggling proceeds in the recipients’ bank accounts and then transferred the proceeds to the leaders under the pretense of work payments. The others also incorporated businesses and opened business accounts to transfer the human smuggling proceeds. Additionally, co-conspirators recruited individuals in the construction industry who accepted human smuggling proceeds in the form of cash in exchange for checks from the recruited individuals’ business bank accounts.

The superseding indictment in this case also notices the criminal forfeiture of two properties belonging to Piedra with current estimated values of \$2,275,000 and \$515,000 that were purchased with the illicit proceeds of human smuggling. Serrano is also agreeing to a money judgment of \$942,537.00.

Piedra is scheduled to be sentenced April 10 and faces a maximum of 20 years in prison.

Ten others previously pleaded guilty for their roles in the scheme. Kevin Daniel Nuber aka Captain, 42, and Laura Nuber aka Barbie, 41, pleaded guilty to conspiracy to transport aliens, placing in jeopardy the life of any person and conspiracy to harbor aliens for the purpose of commercial advantage and private financial gain. Christine Dangler aka Tinkerbelle, 46, Lloyd Bexley, 53, Jeremy Dickens, 47, Juan Manuel Hernandez Cordova aka Tio, 46, David Scott Tallant, 54, Katie Ann Garcia aka Guera, 40, and Abraham Geber Lopez, 28, pleaded guilty to conspiracy to transport and move aliens, placing in jeopardy the life of any person. Oliveria Campuzano Piedra, 54, pleaded guilty to conspiracy to harbor an alien for profit. The co-conspirators are awaiting sentencing.

The indictments and convictions of these defendants are the result of the coordinated efforts of Joint Task Force Alpha (JTFA), which was established by Attorney General Merrick B. Garland in June 2021 to marshal the investigative and prosecutorial resources of the Department of Justice, in partnership with the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to strengthen the Justice Department’s efforts to combat the rise in prolific and dangerous smuggling emanating from Central America and impacting our border communities.

JTFA is comprised of detailees from U.S. Attorneys’ Offices along the southwest border, including the Southern and Western District of Texas, Districts of New Mexico, Arizona and Southern District of California. Numerous components of the Justice Department’s Criminal Division that are part of JTFA also provided dedicated support which the Human Rights and Special Prosecutions Section (HRSP) led. Also supporting the efforts are Office of Prosecutorial Development, Assistance and Training, Narcotic and Dangerous Drug Section, Money Laundering and Asset Recovery Section (MLARS), Office of Enforcement Operations, Office of International Affairs and Violent Crime and Racketeering Section.

JTFA also relies on substantial law enforcement investment from DHS, FBI, Drug Enforcement Administration and other partners. To date, JTFA's work has resulted in over 260 domestic and international arrests of leaders, organizers and significant facilitators of human smuggling; over 180 convictions; significant jail sentences imposed; and substantial seizures and forfeitures of assets and contraband – including hundreds of thousands of dollars in cash, property, vehicles, firearms, ammunition and drugs.

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

Assistant U.S. Attorney and JTFA Detailee for the Southern District of Texas Jennifer Day, HRSP Trial Attorneys Christian Levesque and Angela Buckner and MLARS Trial Attorney Daria Andryushchenko are prosecuting the case with substantial assistance from MLARS Financial Investigator Kelly O'Mara and the Department of Justice's Electronic Surveillance Unit of the Office of Enforcement Operations.

HRSP Trial Attorney Erin Cox previously provided significant assistance in this case.