

Lead Defendants of Prolific Human Smuggling and Money Laundering Network Sentenced in Joint Task Force Alpha Investigation

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Ordered to Pay Over \$2.3M in Money Judgments

A Texas woman and man were sentenced to 121 months and 135 months in prison and ordered to pay money judgments of \$942,537.00 and \$438,119.00, respectively, this week for their roles as the leaders of a human smuggling organization (HSO) that conspired to illegally transport, harbor, and conceal from law enforcement hundreds of undocumented individuals in the United States and launder the proceeds of their illicit human smuggling.

“The two defendants sentenced in this case were leaders of a human smuggling operation that endangered vulnerable migrants for profit,” said Attorney General Merrick B. Garland. “Since I directed the formation of Joint Task Force Alpha (JTFA) in 2021, the Justice Department has combatted the threats posed by dangerous human smuggling networks where they originate and operate. Since then, the Justice Department has made over 345 domestic and international arrests and secured 290 convictions.”

“As these sentencings make clear, human smugglers will ruthlessly and dangerously exploit vulnerable people for profit — intending migrants should not believe their false promises of safety and opportunity,” said Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro N. Mayorkas. “The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) will continue to work with our federal, state, and international partners to help track down these criminals, disrupt their illegal operations, and bring them to justice — the integrity of our lawful, orderly immigration system demands it.”

“The defendants exploited vulnerable migrants by leading a scheme to unlawfully transport them across the U.S. border, using dangerous methods that risked the migrants’ lives in order to evade detection,” said Principal Deputy Assistant Attorney General Brent S. Wible, head of the Justice

Department's Criminal Division. "Because of illegal operations like this one, more than three years ago we launched JTFA to combat the most prolific and harmful human smuggling organizations. The sentences and forfeitures announced today underscore the Criminal Division's commitment to working with its JTFA partners to disrupt and dismantle smuggling networks that callously endanger human life for profit."

"Confining individuals, including minors, in coffin-like spaces with no room to move or breathe, reveals this organization's complete disregard for human life," said U.S. Attorney Alamdar S. Hamdani for the Southern District of Texas. "Those who profit from such human suffering will face justice, and their ill-gotten gains will be stripped away to ensure that crime does not pay."

According to court documents, Erminia Serrano Piedra, also known as Irma and Boss Lady, 33, and Oscar Angel Monroy Alcibar, also known as Pelon, 41, were leaders of an illegal HSO that unlawfully transported, harbored, and concealed from law enforcement the detection of hundreds of undocumented individuals in the United States. These individuals were citizens of Mexico, Guatemala, Colombia, and elsewhere and they or their families paid members of the HSO to help them travel illegally to and within the United States. Serrano Piedra's role included directing the operations of the HSO, recruiting members, ordering payments to be made related to the organization's operation, and instructing members of the HSO to be lookouts for law enforcement. Monroy Alcibar coordinated the smuggling of undocumented individuals and movement of financial proceeds for the HSO.

The HSO used drivers to pick up undocumented individuals near the U.S.-Mexico border and transport them further into the interior of the United States, often harboring them at "stash houses" along the way in locations such as Laredo and Austin, Texas. Drivers for the HSO used various dangerous methods to transport undocumented individuals, including hiding them in suitcases placed in pickup trucks, cramming them in the back of tractor-trailers, covered beds of pickup trucks, repurposed water tankers, and wooden crates strapped to flatbed trailers. The methods used by the HSO to transport undocumented individuals placed their lives in danger, as they were frequently held in contained spaces with little ventilation, which became overheated and made it difficult to breathe, and they were driven at high speeds with no vehicle restraints in the back of trucks and tankers. Members of this HSO commonly referred to the undocumented individuals as "boxes," "packages," or "pieces." Typically, the fee paid to the organization was approximately \$8,000, with \$3,000 paid up front to smugglers in Mexico and the remainder paid once the undocumented individuals entered the United States.

Further, Serrano Piedra and Monroy Alcibar have admitted in court documents that they conspired to engage in financial transactions designed to conceal the nature, location, source, ownership, and control of ill-gotten proceeds of illicit human smuggling and the unlawful harboring and transportation of undocumented individuals. The leaders of the organization recruited and utilized straw persons to accept human smuggling proceeds in the straw persons' bank accounts and then transferred these proceeds to the leaders under the pretense of work payments. The defendants also established businesses and opened business accounts in order to transfer the human smuggling proceeds. In addition, the defendants 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. Serrano Piedra and Monroy Alcibar, both leaders of the HSO, have admitted in court documents that they made significant money from their involvement in human smuggling. Moreover, Serrano Piedra admitted she was going to continue doing this for her lifetime and was not planning to retire.

In addition to the terms in prison, the court entered orders of criminal forfeiture of two properties belonging to one or both of these defendants, which were purchased with the illicit proceeds of human smuggling, recently estimated to have the value of approximately \$2,275,000 and \$515,000.

Serrano Piedra and Monroy Alcibar were originally charged by indictment in August 2022 and then by superseding indictment in August 2023. Serrano Piedra pleaded guilty on Jan. 4, 2024, to conspiracy to transport and move illegal aliens, transporting aliens for commercial and private financial gain and placing the lives of aliens in jeopardy while doing so, and conspiracy to launder money. Monroy Alcibar pleaded guilty on Jan. 9, 2024, to the same charges.

Including Serrano Piedra and Monroy Alcibar, 14 co-conspirators have been sentenced for their various roles in the HSO, including some for laundering illicit proceeds. The sentences ranged up to 135 months in prison, with money judgments totaling over \$2.3 million and forfeiture of interests in real property, including residences located in Bastrop and Elgin, Texas. One other co-conspirator still awaits sentencing.

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

Trial Attorneys Christian Levesque and Angela Buckner of the Criminal Division's Human Rights and Special Prosecutions Section (HRSP), Trial Attorney and JTFA Deputy Director Daria Andryushchenko of the Criminal Division's Money Laundering and Asset Recovery Section (MLARS), MLARS Financial Investigator Kelly O'Mara, and JTFA member Assistant U.S. Attorney Jennifer Day for the Southern District of Texas are prosecuting the case, with substantial assistance from the Electronic Surveillance Unit of the Criminal Division's Office of Enforcement Operations.

This and related convictions of co-conspirators are the result of the coordinated efforts of JTFA. Attorney General Merrick B. Garland established JTFA 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 combat the rise in prolific and dangerous human smuggling and trafficking groups operating in Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. The initiative was expanded to Colombia and Panama to combat human smuggling in the Darién in June 2024. JTFA comprises detailees from U.S. attorneys' offices along the southwest border, including the Southern District of California, District of Arizona, District of New Mexico, and Western and Southern Districts of Texas. Dedicated support is provided by numerous components of the Justice Department's Criminal Division, led by HRSP, and supported by MLARS, the Office of Prosecutorial Development, Assistance, and Training; Narcotic and Dangerous Drug Section; 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, the Drug Enforcement Administration, and other partners. To date, JTFA's work has resulted in more than 345 domestic and international arrests of leaders, organizers, and significant facilitators of human smuggling; more than 290 U.S. convictions; more than 240 defendants sentenced, including significant jail sentences imposed; and forfeitures of substantial assets.

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