

**PRESS RELEASE**

# **Three Mexican Citizens Charged with Trafficking Agricultural Workers into Servitude on Farms in Virginia, North Carolina, and Florida**

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**For Immediate Release**

Office of Public Affairs

A federal grand jury returned a 35-count indictment, unsealed Friday, charging three Mexican citizens for trafficking Mexican farmworkers into forced labor and harboring them in the United States after their visas expired for the defendants' financial gain.

"Three individuals have been indicted for exploiting the H-2A visa program to lure vulnerable workers from Mexico to the United States with promises of legitimate employment, only to then confiscate their identity documents and force them to labor in inhumane conditions," said Assistant Attorney General A. Tysen Duva of the Justice Department's Criminal Division. "These charges reflect the Department's commitment to protecting the integrity of our lawful immigration system and holding accountable those who corrupt it to exploit and abuse foreign workers. The Criminal Division will continue to investigate and prosecute forced labor and human trafficking wherever it occurs."

"We will find and eradicate any illegal immigration we find here in the EDNC," said U.S. Attorney Ellis Boyle for the Eastern District of North Carolina (EDNC). "We do not tolerate abuse of the system to hurt unsuspecting victims of human trafficking."

According to court documents, Martha Zeferino Jose, 42, a permanent resident of the United States and citizen of Mexico, owned and operated Las Princesas Corporation (Las Princesas), a farm labor contracting company based in Washington, North Carolina that recruited workers from Mexico to come to the United States on temporary H-2A agricultural visas. She ran Las Princesas alongside her partner (John Doe), identified at the time of arrest as Jose Rodriguez Munoz, a citizen of Mexico illegally residing in the United States, and her son Jeremy Zeferino Jose, 23, a permanent resident of the United States and citizen of Mexico.

Between approximately August 2021 and July 2022, Martha Zeferino Jose allegedly submitted fraudulent applications to the Department of Labor and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services in which she falsely certified that Las Princesas would comply with all required employment conditions and labor laws – including promises not to charge workers recruitment fees, not to confiscate their documents, and to provide proper wages, meals, housing, and transportation. According to the indictment, Martha Zeferino Jose never intended to honor those commitments.

Recruiters working for Las Princesas allegedly charged the workers significant fees for the opportunity to come to the United States, saddling them with debt before they even arrived. Once the workers were in the country, the defendants allegedly confiscated their passports, visas, and identification documents to prevent them from leaving. The workers were then allegedly compelled to perform physically demanding labor at farms and plant nurseries across three states under degrading conditions. According to the indictment, the defendants made the workers labor for extensive hours without adequate breaks or access to water; housed them in crowded, unsanitary residences that lacked heat, air conditioning, hot water and bedding; failed to pay required wages; withheld food; and denied medical care.

The defendants allegedly imposed strict rules to keep the workers isolated and under their control – prohibiting them from leaving, going anywhere alone, or speaking with people outside the group. They allegedly monitored the workers' activities and created a climate of fear by threatening to report workers to immigration authorities, have them arrested and deported, and ensure they lost future employment opportunities. When some workers' H-2A visas expired, the defendants allegedly told workers to stay in the country rather than informing them of their legal obligation to depart and then harbored the workers with expired visas in residences and at worksites for the defendants' own financial benefit.

When the Department of Labor's Wage and Hour Division launched an investigation into Las Princesas, Martha Zeferino Jose and her partner allegedly obstructed the investigation. According to the indictment, Martha Zeferino Jose returned the workers' confiscated passports and identification documents before investigators arrived and instructed the workers to tell investigators that everything was fine and that Las Princesas had never taken their documents. Munoz allegedly threatened the workers that they would be deported if they told investigators the truth.

Each of the defendants is charged with forced labor, conspiracy to commit forced labor, alien harboring for financial gain, conspiracy to commit alien harboring for financial gain, and document servitude offenses. Additionally, Martha Zeferino Jose is charged with visa fraud, Munoz is charged with obstruction, and they are both charged with

conspiracy to obstruct proceedings before agencies. If convicted, the defendants face maximum penalties of 20 years in prison for each count of forced labor and conspiracy to commit forced labor, 10 years in prison for each count of alien harboring for financial gain and conspiracy to commit alien harboring for financial gain, and five years in prison for document servitude. Additionally, Martha Zeferino Jose faces a maximum penalty of 10 years in prison for visa fraud, Munoz faces a maximum penalty of five years in prison for obstruction, and Martha Zeferino Jose and Munoz face a maximum penalty of five years in prison for conspiracy to commit obstruction.

Homeland Security Investigations and the U.S. Department of Labor, Office of the Inspector General are investigating the case. The U.S. Marshals Service provided valuable assistance.

Trial Attorney Matthew Thiman of the Criminal Division's Human Rights and Special Prosecutions Section and Assistant U.S. Attorney Erin Blondel for the Eastern District of North Carolina are prosecuting the case.

Anyone who has information about human trafficking should report that information to the National Human Trafficking Hotline toll-free at 1-888-373-7888, which is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. For more information about human trafficking, please visit [www.humantraffickinghotline.org](http://www.humantraffickinghotline.org). Information on the Department of Justice's efforts to combat human trafficking can be found at [www.justice.gov/humantrafficking](http://www.justice.gov/humantrafficking).

*An indictment is merely an allegation. All defendants are presumed innocent until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt in a court of law.*

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