PRESS RELEASE

# Five Defendants Charged with Defrauding and Exploiting H-2A Visa Program to Smuggle Aliens into the United States

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**For Immediate Release**
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A superseding indictment was unsealed today in the Southern District of Georgia charging five defendants for their roles in a scheme to exploit a nonimmigrant visa worker program to fraudulently obtain worker visas and smuggle aliens into the United States.

According to court documents, Martha Aquino, also known as "Martha Patricia Resendez Sanchez," or "Marta," 61, Evangelina Aquino De Galvan, 49, and Julio Cervantes, 38, all of Alma, Georgia, as well as Marco Cervantes, also known as "Chiquilin," 41, of Rowlett, Georgia, and Juan Felipe Romero-Lopez, 31, an illegal alien from Mexico, conspired to exploit the H-2A visa program by fraudulently obtaining temporary visas to bring workers into the United States. They lied about where the workers would work and reside and did not comply with the laws and rules governing the visa program, specifically by demanding and receiving improper payments from the workers before the workers could seek H-2A visas or begin working in the United States. The conspirators confiscated and withheld the workers' identification documents, including passports, and at times threatened or used violence against the workers to deter them from leaving or failing to work. After the workers' visas had expired, the conspirators enabled them to remain in the United States and even offered to transport them elsewhere in the United States in exchange for additional improper payments.

"The H-2A is specifically designed to help farmers fill temporary or seasonal jobs when there is a shortage of domestic labor," said Assistant Attorney General A. Tysen Duva of the Justice Department's Criminal Division. "Instead of helping American farmers, these defendants allegedly concocted a scheme to enrich themselves by manipulating the program and smuggling aliens into the country for profit."

“Those who exploit immigrant workers and abuse the H-2A visa program for their own financial gain will be held accountable,” said U.S. Attorney Margaret E. “Meg” Heap for the Southern District of Georgia. “We will continue to partner with our federal, state and local agencies to protect these workers, safeguard the integrity of the H-2A program and prosecute those who turn a lawful employment program into a vehicle for profit and abuse.”

“Exploiting a lawful worker visa program to profit from vulnerable individuals undermines our immigration system, harms legitimate employers, and puts workers at risk,” said Acting Special Agent in Charge Ellen Johnson of Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) Georgia and Alabama. “HSI will continue to work with our federal, state, and local partners to identify and dismantle criminal networks that use fraud, coercion, and violence to facilitate human smuggling and trafficking.”

“The H-2A program exists to meet critical U.S. labor needs through lawful employment, not to facilitate fraud or exploitation,” said Deputy Assistant Director William Ferrari of the U.S. Department of State’s Diplomatic Security Service (DSS) Office of Investigations. “Working closely with Homeland Security Investigations, and alongside the Department of Labor Office of Inspector General and the Georgia Bureau of Investigation, DSS jointly investigated this case. Through our global presence and expertise in visa fraud investigations, DSS will continue working with our law enforcement partners to identify abuses of U.S. visa programs and hold alleged offenders accountable.”

“The defendants allegedly used fraud and intimidation to exploit vulnerable workers and undermine the H-2A visa program, a system designed to meet legitimate agricultural labor needs,” said Inspector General Anthony P. D’Esposito of the U.S. Department of Labor Office of Inspector General. “Their egregious conduct included demanding improper payments, confiscating workers’ identification documents, and using threats or violence to maintain control. The Department of Labor Office of Inspector General will aggressively investigate those who exploit labor programs and workers for profit. We will continue working with our law-enforcement partners to ensure these individuals are held fully accountable.”

Aquino, Julio Cervantes, and Marco Cervantes were arrested this week. Aquino De Galvan remains at large. Romero-Lopez has been detained after being originally charged in May 2026 for unlawful possession of a firearm by an illegal alien. Aquino, Aquino De Galvan, and Julio Cervantes are charged with conspiring to commit visa fraud, visa fraud, and encouraging and inducing aliens to enter the United States illegally for commercial advantage and private gain. Marco Cervantes is charged with conspiring to commit visa fraud and visa fraud. Juan Felipe Romero-Lopez is charged with conspiring to commit visa fraud and being an illegal alien in possession of a firearm. If convicted, Aquino, Aquino De Galvan, Julio Cervantes, Marco Cervantes, and Romero-Lopez each face a maximum penalty of five years in prison for visa fraud conspiracy; Aquino, Aquino De Galvan, Julio Cervantes, and Marco Cervantes each face a maximum penalty of 10 years in prison for visa fraud; Aquino, Aquino De Galvan, and Julio Cervantes each face a maximum penalty of 10 years in prison for encouraging and inducing illegal entry; and Romero-Lopez faces a maximum penalty of 15 years in prison for being an illegal alien in possession of a firearm.

HSI Savannah, the U.S. Department of State's Diplomatic Security Service, Department of Labor-Office of Inspector General, and the Georgia Bureau of Investigation are investigating the case. HSI's Human Smuggling Unit in Washington, D.C., and Custom and Border Protection's National Targeting Center International Interdiction Task Force also assisted with the investigation.

Trial Attorney Sean F. Mulryne of the Criminal Division's Human Rights and Special Prosecutions Section (HRSP) and Assistant U.S. Attorneys Marcela C. Mateo and Makeia R. Jonese for the Southern District of Georgia are prosecuting the case, with assistance from HRSP Analyst/Latin America Specialist Joanna Crandall.

The indictment announced today was supported and prosecuted by Joint Task Force Alpha (JTFA), the Department's lead effort in combating high-impact human smuggling and trafficking committed by cartels and Transnational Criminal Organizations (TCOs). A highly successful partnership between the Department of Justice and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), JTFA investigates and prosecutes human smuggling and trafficking and related immigration crimes that impact public safety and border security. JTFA's mission is to target the leaders and organizers of Cartels and TCOs involved in human smuggling and trafficking throughout the Americas. The Attorney General has elevated and expanded JTFA to target the most prolific and dangerous human smuggling and trafficking groups operating not only in Mexico and the Northern Triangle countries of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras, but also in Canada, the Caribbean and the maritime border, and elsewhere. Led by the Criminal Division's Human Rights and Special Prosecutions Section and supported by the Money Laundering, Narcotics and Forfeiture Section, the Office of International Affairs, and the Office of Enforcement Operations, among others, JTFA has dedicated prosecutors from the Southern District of California; District of Arizona; District of New Mexico; Western and Southern Districts of Texas; Southern District of Florida; Northern District of New York; and District of Vermont. JTFA also partners with other USAOs throughout the country and supports high-priority cases in any district. All JTFA cases rely on substantial law enforcement resources from DHS, including Immigration and Customs Enforcement/HSI and U.S. Customs and Border Protection/Border Patrol and Office of

Field Operations, as well as FBI and other law enforcement agencies. To date, JTFA's work has resulted in more than 458 domestic and international arrests of leaders, organizers, and significant facilitators of alien smuggling and/or trafficking; more than 408 U.S. convictions; and more than 357 significant jail sentences imposed, and forfeitures of substantial assets.

*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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