

Department of Justice
U.S. Attorney's Office
Eastern District of Wisconsin

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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Milwaukee-Area Gas Station Owner Charged in Federal Court with Forced Labor Trafficking and Other Crimes

United States Attorney Gregory J. Haanstad announced today that a federal grand jury has returned a three-count indictment charging the owner of several Milwaukee-area gas stations with labor-related crimes involving his business that occurred between 2009 and 2011. Harshinder Bhatia (age: 58), was charged with one count of harboring an alien for financial gain, one count of forced labor involving aggravated sexual abuse, and one count of document servitude. He was arraigned on these charges on October 24, 2017.

If convicted, Bhatia faces up to 5 years in prison on the charge of document servitude, up to 10 years in prison on the charge of alien harboring, and up to life in prison on the charge of forced labor. The indictment also notifies Bhatia of the government's intention to seek forfeiture of a number of real properties used to facilitate these offenses or acquired as proceeds of these offenses.

According to the indictment, Bhatia obtained the labor and services of an Indian national female using force and threats of force, causing her to believe that if she did not perform such labor and services, she would suffer serious harm. The indictment charges that this crime involved aggravated sexual abuse and was furthered by Bhatia's possession of the victim's passport.

This matter is being investigated by members of the Federal Human Trafficking Task Force, including special agents and detectives representing Homeland Security Investigations, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Department of Labor, and the Milwaukee Police Department. The case is being prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorney Erica J. Lounsberry.

An indictment is merely a formal charge that a defendant has committed one or more violations of federal criminal law, and every defendant is presumed innocent unless, and until, proven guilty