

PRESS RELEASE

Three defendants associated with human trafficking operation sentenced to federal prison

Friday, June 12, 2026

For Immediate Release

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

Each had role associated with forced farm labor in southern Georgia

WAYCROSS, Georgia: Three defendants have been sentenced on federal conspiracy charges after a transnational, multi-year investigation into a human smuggling and labor trafficking operation that illegally transported Mexican and Central American workers into brutal conditions on South Georgia farms.

Sentences were handed down by U.S. District Court Judge Lisa G. Wood and announced by Southern District of Georgia U.S. Attorney Margaret E. 'Meg' Heap. They include:

- **Margarita Rojas Cardenas**, a/k/a "Maggie Cardenas," 48, of Reidsville, Georgia, was sentenced to 51 months in prison followed by three years of supervised release and ordered to pay restitution in the amount of \$20,838.94 after pleading guilty to Conspiracy to Commit Money Laundering.
- **Nery Rene Carrillo-Najarro**, 61, of Douglas, Georgia, was sentenced to 40 months in prison followed by three years of supervised release after pleading guilty to Conspiracy to Commit Money Laundering. The court scheduled a restitution hearing on August 4, 2026, to assess victims' losses and to determine the amount of restitution owed by the defendant.
- **Brett Donovan Bussey**, 44, of Douglas, was sentenced to 10 months in prison followed by three years of supervised release and ordered to pay restitution in the amount of \$6,224.73 after pleading guilty to Conspiracy to Commit Money Laundering.

There is no parole in the federal system.

"This case is an outstanding example of the extensive collaboration with our partner government agencies which led to these convictions," said U.S. Attorney Heap. "The work carried out by these professionals has had a direct impact in protecting vulnerable people and preserving the American dream for those who pursue it."

As described in court documents and proceedings, investigators from Homeland Security Investigations, the U.S. Department of Labor, U.S. Department of State's Diplomatic Security Service, the U.S. Postal Inspection Service, and the FBI began investigating the Patricio transnational criminal organization in November 2018. Court documents describe that in or before 2015, the conspirators and their associates "engaged in mail fraud, international forced labor trafficking, and money laundering, among other crimes," fraudulently using the H-2A work visa program to transport foreign nationals from Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras into the United States under the pretext of serving as agricultural workers.

The activities took place within the Southern, Middle, and Northern Districts of Georgia; the Middle District of Florida; the Southern District of Texas; and Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and elsewhere. The conspirators required the workers to pay unlawful fees for transportation, food, and housing while illegally withholding their travel and identification documents and subjected the workers "to perform physically demanding work for little or no pay, housing them in crowded, unsanitary, and degrading living conditions, and by threatening them with deportation and violence."

The conspirators are alleged to have reaped more than \$200 million from the illegal scheme, laundering the funds through cash purchases of land, homes, vehicles, and businesses; through cash purchases of cashier's checks; and by funneling millions of dollars through a casino.

The case was originally investigated under the Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Forces (OCDETF) operation, now Homeland Security Task Force (HSTF). HSTF is an interagency law enforcement network established to investigate and dismantle transnational criminal organizations, human smuggling networks, and foreign gangs in the United States. Operation Blooming Onion was also designated as a Priority Transnational Organized Crime Case.

"Federal labor programs are not a playground for criminals. Let these sentencings send a clear message: if you exploit workers, commit fraud, launder money, or abuse programs designed to help people, my office will find you and hold you accountable," said Anthony P. D'Esposito, Inspector General, U.S. Department of Labor. "This scheme preyed on vulnerable individuals and corrupted a lawful worker program for illegal profit. Alongside our law enforcement partners, we will continue rooting out fraud, protecting American workers, and ensuring bad actors face the full weight of justice."

The sentencings of Cardenas, Bussey, and Carrillo-Najarro bring the case against the original 24 defendants to a close. Many of the defendants were sentenced to

incarceration and ordered to pay restitution to the victims in the case, with the restitution total reaching more than \$1.3 million.

Agencies investigating this case include Homeland Security Investigations; U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, Fraud Detection and National Security; the U.S. Department of Labor Office of Inspector General, and Wage and Hour Division; U.S. Department of State's Diplomatic Security Service; the FBI; the U.S. Postal Inspection Service; and the U.S. Marshals Service, with assistance from the Georgia National Guard; the Georgia Bureau of Investigation; the Georgia State Patrol; the Coffee County Sheriff's Office; the Chatham County Sheriff's Office; the Tattnall County Sheriff's Office; the Bacon County Sheriff's Office; and the Tift County Sheriff's Office. The case was prosecuted for the United States by Southern District of Georgia Assistant U.S. Attorneys Ryan E. Bondura and L. Alexander Hamner.

If you believe you have information about a potential trafficking situation, call the National Human Trafficking Hotline at 1-888-373-7888. Anti-Trafficking Hotline Advocates are available 24/7 to take reports of potential human trafficking. All reports are confidential, and you may remain anonymous. Interpreters are available. The information you provide will be reviewed by the National Hotline and forwarded to specialized law enforcement and/or service providers where appropriate.

Contact

For any questions, please contact the U.S. Attorney's Office at (912) 652-4422.