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JUSTICE NEWS

Department of Justice

Office of Public Affairs

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Friday, September 17, 2010

**Florida Couple Pleads Guilty to Forced Labor Conspiracy
of 39 Filipino Guest Workers**

WASHINGTON - Sophia Manuel, 41, and Alfonso Baldonado Jr., 45, owners of Quality Staffing Services Corporation, a labor contracting service, pleaded guilty to conspiring to hold 39 Filipino nationals in compelled service in country clubs and hotels in Southeast Florida. Manuel also pleaded guilty to making false statements in an application she filed with the U.S. Department of Labor to obtain foreign labor certifications and visas under the federal H2B guest worker program.

According to documents presented in court, the defendants conspired to obtain a cheap, compliant and readily available labor pool, by making false promises to entice the victims to incur debts. The defendants then compelled the victims' labor and services through threats to have the workers arrested and deported, knowing the workers faced serious economic harm and possible incarceration for nonpayment of debts in the Philippines. After the victims arrived at the defendants' residence in Boca Raton, Fla., the defendants confiscated their passports; housed them in overcrowded, substandard conditions without adequate food or drinking water; put them to work at area country clubs and hotels for little or no pay; required them to remain in the defendants' service, unpaid when there was insufficient work; ordered them not to leave the premises without permission and an escort; and threatened to have the workers arrested and deported for complaining about these terms and conditions.

"These defendants victimized vulnerable individuals for profit," said Thomas E. Perez, Assistant Attorney General for the Civil Rights Division. "Forced labor robs victims of their freedom and their dignity, and it will not be tolerated in this country."

"Each day, people leave behind their families and homelands in search of freedom and a better life in the United States. The individuals in this case were no different," said Wifredo Ferrer, U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of Florida. "They came here seeking a better life, but found their dream of freedom and a better life transformed into a real-life nightmare of servitude and fear. With today's guilty pleas, we come one step closer to punishing the defendants for their crimes."

This case was investigated by the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Homeland Security Investigations; the U.S. Department of Labor - Office of Inspector General, Office of Labor Racketeering and Fraud Investigations; FBI; the U.S. Department of State - Bureau of Diplomatic Security; the Florida Department of Law Enforcement; and the Florida Office of the Attorney General. This case is being prosecuted by trial attorney Susan French of the Civil Rights Division's Human Trafficking Prosecution Unit and Assistant U.S. Attorney Shaniek Maynard.

10-1048

Civil Rights Division

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