



## U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement

### News Releases

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### **Ex-Armenian consular employee pleads to charges in immigration fraud scheme**

SANTA ANA, Calif. - A former employee of the Armenian consulate in Los Angeles pleaded guilty Monday to one count of obstructing federal proceedings related to his role in a scheme to sell an illegal alien a document called a "letter of refusal," which allowed that illegal alien to avoid deportation from the United States to Armenia.

Hakop Hovanesyan, 54, faces up to five years in prison when he is sentenced Jan. 24, 2011. Hovanesyan, who worked at the Armenian Consulate in Los Angeles until May 2007, was one of five defendants charged in July 2009 as a result of a two-year investigation by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) Office of Homeland Security Investigations (HSI). The other defendants included a former Armenian Consul in Los Angeles and a Beverly Hills, Calif., immigration attorney.

The ICE HSI investigation focused on the sale of "letters of refusal." The letters, which are issued by embassies and consulates, state that a country will not issue a travel document for a particular individual, essentially blocking that person's deportation to that nation. According to the charges in the criminal complaints, the five defendants sold official letters of refusal from the Armenian consulate for as much as \$37,000. Those letters prevented the removal of Armenian nationals to Armenia. The investigation revealed that some of those who purchased the letters were Armenian nationals facing deportation after being convicted in the United States of felony offenses.

"The defendants in this case exploited their ties to the community and knowledge of the immigration system to help dangerous criminals, among others, avoid deportation," said Claude Arnold, special agent in charge of ICE HSI in Los Angeles. "We will move aggressively to prevent unscrupulous opportunists from profiting from schemes that undermine public safety and compromise the integrity of our nation's immigration system."

In addition to Hovanesyan, the remaining four defendants, who are all awaiting trial, include:

- Norair Ghalumian, 52, of Burbank, Calif., the Armenian Consul in Los Angeles from 1999 through 2003;
- Margarita Mkrtchyan, 42, of Glendale, Calif., an immigration attorney;
- Oganés Nardos, 37, of Valencia, Calif., a substance abuse counselor; and
- Elvis Madatyan, 47, of Glendale, Calif.

The ICE HSI investigation showed that the five defendants, working essentially independently, obtained clients via word of mouth in the Armenian community.

According to the criminal complaints, the defendants used contacts in the Armenian government to procure official refusal letters on behalf of their clients. The letters of refusal were sent to ICE officials, thus preventing the aliens' deportation.