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News Releases

NOVEMBER 15, 2010 WASHINGTON, DC

ICE/HSI dismantles human trafficking ring, saving 2 young girls from lives as sex slaves Perpetrator sentenced to 50 years in prison

Soledad was an easy mark for Juan Mendez and his girlfriend Christina Andres Perfecto to ensnare into their sex trafficking ring. Thirteen-year-old Soledad lived in poverty with her family in a small rural town in Mexico. The family eked out a living on \$300 a year and did without running water or electricity. Soledad yearned for a better life. When Perfecto traveled to Mexico, she regaled the impressionable girl with promises of riches that awaited Soledad if she traveled back to America with her. Perfecto promised Soledad a job in Mendez's restaurant.

Soledad had no reason to doubt Perfecto. Perfecto, who had once lived in the same village as Soledad, had escaped the same impoverished conditions and by all accounts was living the good life in America. The proof of Perfecto's success was the huge sums of money Perfecto had sent back to her family in Mexico. With Soledad convinced, Perfecto persuaded Soledad's parents to allow her to bring their daughter to the U.S. Perfecto said that Soledad would get a good education in America. With parental blessings, Perfecto then smuggled Soledad across the border.

On their arrival in Nashville, Tenn., Soledad discovered that she had been duped. No restaurant and no school awaited her. Perfecto's boyfriend, however, Mendez, was all too real. He had been eagerly awaiting the arrival of his newly-delivered prey.

Meanwhile, In September 2006, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) Special Agent (SA) Greg Swearngin of the Nashville Special Agent in Charge office was working a drug investigation. Swearngin had no way of knowing, at this point in time, that his life would soon intersect with Soledad and change the course of her life.

Swearngin heard from a confidential informant that underage girls were working at Latino brothels in Memphis, Tenn. Thus began Operation Latina Libre, and the search for possible victims of human trafficking began. As the leading federal agency in the fight against human trafficking, HSI works on a number of fronts to eradicate this crime—a crime that amounts to slavery—in many cases, sexual slavery.

At the height of the investigation, more than 150 law enforcement agents and officers from seven federal and state agencies executed one of the largest, most complex search warrants in the Western District of Tennessee. Law enforcement teams raided brothels at seven different locations, disrupting the activities of brothel owners, prostitutes and male customers and took 27 individuals into custody. Cell phone records and subsequent interviews provided more leads. The trail ended in Smyrna, Tenn., where Soledad was found and brought to safety.

Soledad recounted to SA Swearngin—as well as to an FBI agent and an Assistant U.S. Attorney, who also played major roles in the case—the horrifying details of extreme psychological and physical abuse she endured, including rape and beatings, at the hands of Mendez. Mendez kept Soledad on the move from brothel to brothel throughout the South forcing her to engage in prostitution with a continuous stream of customers.

Soledad also said that Mendez dispatched Perfecto back to the Mexican village to recruit Soledad's 17-year-old cousin, Emma. Succumbing to Perfecto's persuasive deceit, Emma met the same fate as Soledad. Locked away and forbidden to communicate with each other, Soledad and Emma remained fearful and depressed. Mendez retained the lucrative profits from his sex slavery ring.

Law enforcement authorities found Mendez and Perfecto in a hotel in Nashville where they were arrested and brought to justice. Mendez pled guilty on Dec. 13, 2007 to two counts of child sex trafficking and sex trafficking by force, fraud and coercion. He admitted to fraudulently luring two young girls to Tennessee with the intent of forcing them into prostitution. Mendez further admitted to threatening the victims, physically and verbally, in order to coerce them into prostitution. On June 27, 2008, Mendez was sentenced to 50 years in prison. On Dec. 23, 2009, Perfecto was sentenced to 190 months in prison for recruiting and bringing two young girls to Tennessee.

U.S. charitable and relief organizations, working with ICE and other federal agencies, came to the aid of Soledad and Emma, who are recovering from their trauma.

"Human traffickers who sexually exploit children may as well wear a target on their backs," said HSI Executive Associate Director James Dinkins. "HSI will investigate and bring to justice perpetrators of these crimes who prey on those most vulnerable and bring nothing but pain and misery to so many lives."

Learn more about ICE's role in combating [human trafficking](#).

Learn more about the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's [Blue Campaign](#).

