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News Releases

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2 Houston men sentenced to lengthy prison terms for hostage taking

HOUSTON - Two local men were sentenced on Monday to lengthy federal prison terms for holding smuggled aliens hostage for ransom payments, announced U.S. Attorney José Angel Moreno, Southern District of Texas. The investigation was conducted by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) Homeland Security Investigations (HSI), and the Houston Police Department (HPD).

Alejandro Pantoja-Rosales, 29, was sentenced to 21 years and 10 months imprisonment; and Juan Romero-Trejo, 36, received 20 years by U.S. District Judge Vanessa Gilmore on April 25. Pantoja-Rosales and Romero-Trejo pleaded guilty on March 26, 2010 to one count of hostage taking and conspiracy to commit hostage taking, respectively. Both admitted to harboring aliens in a Houston stash house and apartment where the aliens were kept until relatives or friends paid a fee for their release. Four other defendants, Heriberto Perez-Pinon, 26, Israel Perez-Pinon, 27, Edgar Ivan Guerrero, 21, and Eduardo Lopez-Vargas, 33, have also pleaded guilty to hostage taking or conspiracy to commit hostage taking. Both defendants will be deported to Mexico after they complete their prison sentences.

On Aug. 21, 2009, Heriberto Perez-Pinon, Pantoja-Rosales, Lopez-Vargas and Guerrero drove to a location near El Campo, Texas, to target a load of 13 aliens being transported by another smuggler. In the effort to hijack the pickup truck in which the 13 aliens were being transported, Pantoja-Rosales fired multiple gunshots at the truck. The defendants then dragged the driver from the pickup and pistol-whipped him until he was severely injured. Pantoja-Rosales then drove off with the load of 13 aliens with the three other defendants following in separate vehicles. The smuggled aliens were taken to a Houston stash house on the 5400 block of Heron Drive, where Israel Perez-Pinon and Guerrero placed telephone calls to the aliens' relatives demanding money, to be paid by wire transfer, for their release.

The investigation leading to the arrest and filing of criminal charges began when a concerned citizen contacted HPD on behalf of two aliens who escaped from the load on the way to the stash house. While talking with officers, the two aliens noticed Pantoja-Rosales and Lopez-Vargas drive-by, apparently attempting to recapture them. HPD officers arrested Pantoja-Rosales and Lopez-Vargas. Officers and agents with ICE HSI were then led to the stash house on Heron Drive, where Guerrero and Israel Perez-Pinon were found guarding four aliens in a middle bedroom who had not yet been released. Electricity to the house had been turned off.

ICE HSI agents and HPD officers learned of the possibility that the organization was harboring additional aliens at an apartment located on the 4000 block of Hollister. There, agents and officers discovered Romero-Trejo, who was arrested, and two female aliens. Heriberto Perez-Pinon was arrested the following day during a traffic stop.

The two female aliens found at the apartment, as well as a third female alien who came forward days later, stated that they had been sexually assaulted by Romero-Trejo and Pantoja-Rosales.

Pantoja-Rosales' and Romero-Trejo's sentences were pronounced following a lengthy sentencing hearing. Testifying at the hearing was one of the female illegal aliens who had been held hostage for upwards of two weeks. The woman described how

Pantoja-Rosales and Romero-Trejo sexually assaulted her and two other female aliens on multiple occasions while awaiting ransom payments from families of the women. Also stated in court was information regarding a rape kit examination following the testifying woman's rescue by immigration agents which revealed the presence of DNA that was later linked to defendant Romero-Trejo.

With the exception of Guerrero who is a U.S. citizen, all the defendants are illegal aliens.

Guerrero was sentenced to 17 ½ years in prison on April 18. Israel Perez-Pinion is scheduled for sentencing on May 9; Lopez-Vargas is set for June 6. Heriberto Perez-Pinion, the believed leader of the conspiracy, will also be sentenced June 6.

Assistant U.S. Attorney David Searle, Southern District of Texas, is prosecuting this case.

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