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News Releases



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2 brothers and hit-man convicted of racketeering and murder conspiracies involving Chicago false ID document ring

CHICAGO — Three local men are facing mandatory life imprisonment after a federal jury found them guilty Monday of racketeering conspiracy, murder in aid of racketeering, and related crimes after a six-week trial in U.S. District Court.

The March 4 guilty verdicts resulted from an investigation conducted by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) Homeland Security Investigations (HSI).

Two brothers, Julio and Manuel Leija-Sanchez, operated a lucrative, black-market counterfeit identification document business in Chicago's Little Village community for at least 15 years. They were both convicted, along with Gerardo Salazar-Rodriguez, who they directed to commit an execution-style murder in Mexico of a fledgling competitor. The murder plot was intended to prevent two former employees from starting a competing business and to maintain control over employees of their operation, which generated annual revenues of about \$3 million.

Evidence at trial showed that Salazar-Rodriguez fired more than a dozen shots in killing one of the victims in his taxi cab near Mexico City in April 2007. During trial, the jury heard transcripts of intercepted telephone conversations in which he boasted to the brothers about the murder. He also hunted for a second victim who he believed was in Mexico at the time but who was actually in federal custody in Chicago. That intended victim, who pleaded guilty to fraudulent identification document charges, cooperated and testified as a government witness at trial.

After the jury returned guilty verdicts on all counts March 4, the trial ended Tuesday when the jury returned special findings regarding the murder that raised the maximum penalty for racketeering conspiracy to life in prison. The murder in aid of racketeering conviction carries a mandatory life sentence for all three defendants. U.S. District Judge Rebecca Pallmeyer scheduled sentencing for Sept. 12.

"This violent conspiracy went to great lengths to corner the fake document market in Chicago, going so far as to murder a rival vendor to protect their lucrative turf," said Gary Hartwig, special agent in charge of HSI Chicago. "These guilty verdicts clearly demonstrate our unyielding resolve to dismantle the criminal organizations that perpetuate and profit from document fraud within our borders."

The trial and convictions stem from Operation Paper Tiger, an investigation conducted by HSI agents, along with other local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies. In April 2007, the investigation resulted in charges against 24 defendants and the dismantling of the Leija-Sanchez fraudulent document organization that operated in and around the Little Village Discount Mall at West 26th and Albany in Chicago. Except for the three trial defendants and three fugitives, all of the remaining defendants were convicted.

Manuel Leija-Sanchez, 45, and Salazar-Rodriguez, 40, were arrested later in Mexico and were extradited to the United States in 2010 and 2011 to stand trial, together with Julio Leija-Sanchez, 37, who was arrested in Chicago in 2007. A third Leija-Sanchez brother, Pedro, 40, was also arrested in Mexico and extradited to the U.S. in 2011. He pleaded guilty last August to racketeering conspiracy for operating the fraudulent ID ring with his brothers. He is awaiting imposition of an agreed sentence of 20 years in prison, which is currently scheduled for March 13.

Evidence at trial showed that the three Leija-Sanchez brothers operated the bustling illegal business between 1993 and 2007. The Mexico-based organization was supervised by an overall leader living in Chicago, and the leadership position rotated among the Leija-Sanchez brothers. The organization sold as many as 100 sets of fraudulent identification documents each day, charging customers about \$200 per "set," which consisted of a social security card and either a U.S. immigration "green card" or a state driver's license.

Manuel and Julio Leija-Sanchez and Salazar-Rodriguez conspired to murder Guillermo Jimenez-Flores, aka "Montes," a former member of their organization who became a fledgling rival and was shot to death by Salazar-Rodriguez in Mexico in April 2007. The three trial defendants also were convicted of conspiracy to kill a second victim, Bruno Freddy Ramirez-Camela, who they believed was in Mexico but was actually incarcerated in Chicago.

These convictions were announced by Gary S. Shapiro, U.S. Attorney for the Northern District of Illinois. He commended the years of hard work by HSI agents, who were joined in the investigation by the Chicago and Galveston, Texas, police departments, and the Chicago offices of the U.S. Secret Service; FBI; U.S. Postal Inspection Service; and Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF). The Government of Mexico and Mexican law enforcement partners also provided significant assistance.

Assistant U.S. Attorneys Michelle Nasser, Andrew Porter and William Ridgway, all from the Northern District of Illinois, prosecuted this case.

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U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) is the largest investigative arm of the Department of Homeland Security.

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