

Mexican national sentenced in major Middle East-Mexico-Arizona smuggling scheme

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The United States-Mexico border is seen in Hereford, Ariz., March 16, 2024. Photo: Cameron Arcand / The Center Square

(The Center Square) – Another Mexican national has been sentenced for her role in a massive Middle East-Mexico-US human smuggling operation, this time in Arizona. The sentencing came as five illegal foreign nationals were indicted in a human smuggling operation based in Phoenix.

Sixteen months into the Trump administration, every week, U.S. attorneys are announcing the results of multi-agency investigations and busts of human and drug smuggling operations: indictments, guilty pleas and sentencings

In Arizona, where a record several million illegal border crossers were reported during the Biden administration, perpetrators are being apprehended and prosecuted.

In one case, Mexican national Ofelia Hernandez Salas was sentenced this week to 11 years in prison for her role in a years-long smuggling operation. In this scheme, she and her coconspirators

arranged the travel and smuggling of hundreds of foreign nationals from more than a dozen Asian, Middle Eastern and Latin American countries through Mexico into Arizona.

Those smuggled came from Bangladesh, Yemen, Pakistan, Eritrea, India, United Arab Emirates, Uzbekistan, Russia, Egypt, Brazil, Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala and Mexico, according to the complaint.

“Transnational human smuggling at a large scale directly threatens our national security,” Assistant Attorney General A. Tysen Duva of the Justice Department’s Criminal Division said. “Ofelia Hernandez Salas and her co-conspirators endangered our communities on a massive scale by illegally bringing foreign nationals from more than a dozen countries into the United States. Not only did she take away the ability to properly vet these people from immigration authorities, she and her co-conspirators also robbed these people of their personal belongings at gun or knife point. Illegal border crossings are already incredibly dangerous; this defendant only increased the potential of mortal danger they faced by adding robbery to her criminal acts.”

According to the complaint, Hernandez Salas and her co-conspirators directed foreign nationals to cross the Arizona-Mexico border in several ways. They provided them with ladders to climb over border fences, showed them where to crawl under fences and provided them with planks to walk across waterways, according to the complaint. They also moved them “in droves” using a tactic identified by Border Patrol as “task saturation.”

Hernandez Salas and her co-conspirators were armed with guns and knives, Homeland Security Investigations Yuma officers, who led the investigation, said. They also robbed those they smuggled, taking their money, cell phones, and other belongings while also charging them tens of thousands of dollars, according to the complaint.

In March 2023, Hernandez Salas and co-conspirator Raúl Saucedo-Huipio were arrested in Mexico in response to a Department of Justice request. They were later extradited.

They both pleaded guilty to human smuggling charges. Saucedo-Huipio's sentencing is scheduled in June. After serving their respective sentences, they will be deported to Mexico.

In another case, five illegal foreign nationals were indicted on Tuesday on human smuggling and harboring charges. Four Mexican men and one Guatemalan woman – all in the country illegally – were arrested on charges of running an “alien smuggling operation” in Phoenix. If convicted, they each face up to 10 years in prison.

Border Patrol Intelligence Unit and HSI officers uncovered the scheme, which they said involved using Phoenix residences and apartments as stash houses to hold illegal foreign nationals. From

there, they transported them across the country in minivans with charity license plates, according to the complaint.

While being transported, some were forced inside the trunk. At the stash house, those held were confined to bedrooms, required to sleep on floors, prohibited from leaving or making calls, kept in filthy conditions and didn't have enough food, according to the charges.

At the height of the border crisis, more than 775,000 illegal foreign nationals were reported in Arizona in fiscal 2023, including nearly 200,000 gotaways – those who evade capture, The Center Square exclusively reported.

In 2022, the Tucson Sector alone reported nearly 460,000 illegal border crossers, totaling more than the individual populations of most Arizona towns and counties, The Center Square exclusively reported.

After President Donald Trump's first year in office, illegal entries plummeted in Arizona by 92%. The U.S. Army and CBP are also constructing roughly 100 miles of new border wall and barrier structures in Arizona.

Prosecutions are also ongoing. At the end of April, in one week alone, the U.S. Attorney for the District of Arizona brought immigration-related charges against 217 individuals, including 13 human smuggling cases.