

# Smuggling Leader and Top Coordinator Will Spend Remainder of Their Lives in Prison Following Their Sentencing on Third Anniversary of Deadly Tractor-Trailer Smuggling Conspiracy

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**For Immediate Release**

Office of Public Affairs

Two convicted human smugglers were sentenced in a federal court in San Antonio today for their prominent roles in the 2022 mass casualty human smuggling conspiracy that resulted in the deaths of 47 adults and six children.

U.S. District Judge Orlando Garcia for the Western District of Texas sentenced Orduna-Torres to life in prison and a \$250,000 fine, and Gonzales-Ortega to 83 years in prison and a \$250,000 fine. Both defendants were found guilty by a federal jury in March for three counts related to the transportation of aliens within the United States resulting in death, causing serious bodily injury, and placing lives in jeopardy. Following the jury's verdict at the trial, Judge Garcia set the sentencing date, noting that it would be three years to the day from when the 53 migrants perished as a result of the defendants' smuggling scheme.

"These criminals will spend the rest of their lives in prison because of their cruel choice to profit off of human suffering," said Attorney General Pamela Bondi. "Today's sentences are a powerful message to human smugglers everywhere: we will not rest until you are behind bars."

"Three years to the day after these two smugglers and their co-conspirators left dozens of men, women, and children locked in a sweltering tractor-trailer to die in the Texas summer heat, they learned that they will spend the rest of their lives locked away in a federal prison," said U.S. Attorney Justin R. Simmons for the Western District of Texas. "We recognize the justice handed down by Judge Garcia and thank our law enforcement partners for their great work that led to today's outcome. At the same time, we reinforce the message that these criminal organizations will not place the lives of the desperate and vulnerable above their own financial enrichment. My office remains focused on prosecuting smugglers and their networks, and ultimately eradicating transnational criminal organizations."

"Today's sentences are the result of a far-reaching investigation and a tireless commitment by HSI and our law enforcement partners to dismantle the deadliest human

smuggling operation in U.S. history,” said Special Agent in Charge Craig Larrabee for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) San Antonio. “This case serves as a stark reminder: human smuggling is not a service — it is a deadly criminal enterprise. HSI will pursue smugglers relentlessly, wherever they operate. No one, who participates in the smuggling of human beings, will escape the reach of justice.”

According to court documents and evidence presented at trial, Felipe Orduna-Torres, also known as Cholo, Chuequito/Chuekito, and Negro, 30, was a leader and organizer, and Armando Gonzales-Ortega, also known as El Don and Don Gon, 55, was a coordinator in the human smuggling organization (HSO) which illegally brought adults and children from Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico into the United States between December 2021 and June 2022.

Court documents and evidence presented at the trial revealed that Orduna-Torres and Gonzales-Ortega worked in concert to transport and facilitate the transportation of the migrants, sharing routes, guides, stash houses, trucks, trailers, and transporters in order to consolidate costs, minimize risks, and maximize profit. The HSO maintained a variety of tractors and trailers for their smuggling operations, some of which were stored at a private parking lot in San Antonio.

In the days leading up to June 27, 2022, Orduna-Torres and others exchanged the names of illegal aliens who would be smuggled in an upcoming tractor-trailer load. Gonzales-Ortega traveled to Laredo to meet the tractor-trailer, where at least 64 undocumented individuals, including eight children and one pregnant woman, were loaded for smuggling.

Some of the defendants, including Orduna-Torres, were aware that the trailer’s reefer unit was malfunctioning and was not blowing any cool air to the migrants inside. When members of the organization met the tractor-trailer at the end of its approximately three-hour journey to San Antonio, they opened the doors to find 48 of the migrants were either already dead or had died on site, including the pregnant woman. Sixteen of the undocumented individuals were transported to hospitals — five of whom died.

In addition to their sentences described above, the court also ordered Orduna-Torres to pay a \$96,000 money judgment and ordered the forfeiture of the following assets: one 2008 Volvo semi-tractor; one 1995 Phoenix trailer; one 2015 Cadillac Escalade; one 2017 Ford F-350 Super Duty Truck; and \$59,445.50.

Five other defendants in this case have pleaded guilty for their involvement in the smuggling event. Riley Covarrubias-Ponce, also known as Rrili and Rilay, 32, is scheduled to be sentenced Nov. 6; Luis Alberto Rivera-Leal, 39, is scheduled to be sentenced on Nov. 13; Christian Martinez, 31, is scheduled to be sentenced on Nov. 20; and Homero Zamorano Jr., 48, is scheduled to be sentenced Dec. 4. Juan Francisco D’Luna Bilbao, 51, is indicted separately and is also scheduled to be sentenced Dec. 4.

In a related case, Rigoberto Ramon Miranda-Orozco, 48, allegedly worked with the HSO to smuggle aliens into the United States on the same fatal journey orchestrated by Orduna-Torres and his co-conspirators. He made his initial appearance in San Antonio on March 17, seven months after he was arrested in Guatemala, and is currently scheduled for a jury trial Sept. 29.

HSI investigated the case with the assistance of the FBI and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, and has received tremendous support from Customs and Border Protection; Border Patrol; ICE's Enforcement and Removal Operations; the San Antonio Police Department; the Bexar County Sheriff's Office; the San Antonio Fire Department; the Marshall Police Department; and the Palestine Police Department.

Assistant U.S. Attorneys Eric Fuchs, Sarah Spears and Ray Gattinella for the Western District of Texas are prosecuting the case.

These convictions are the result of the coordinated efforts of Joint Task Force Alpha (JTFA). JTFA, a partnership with the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), has been elevated and expanded by the Attorney General with a mandate to target cartels and other transnational criminal organizations to eliminate human smuggling and trafficking networks operating in Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Panama, and Colombia that impact public safety and the security of our borders. JTFA currently comprises detailees from U.S. Attorneys' Offices along the southwest border. Dedicated support is provided by numerous components of the Justice Department's Criminal Division, led by the Human Rights and Special Prosecutions Section and supported by the Money Laundering and Asset Recovery Section; Office of Enforcement Operations; and the Office of International Affairs, among others. JTFA also relies on substantial law enforcement investment from DHS, FBI, the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), and other partners. To date, JTFA's work has resulted in more than 385 domestic and international arrests of leaders, organizers, and significant facilitators of alien smuggling; more than 345 U.S. convictions; more than 300 significant jail sentences imposed; and forfeitures of substantial assets.

This case is part of Operation Take Back America, a nationwide initiative that marshals the full resources of the Department of Justice to repel the invasion of illegal immigration, achieve the total elimination of cartels and transnational criminal organizations, and protect our communities from the perpetrators of violent crime. Operation Take Back America streamlines efforts and resources from the Department's Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Forces (OCDETFs) and Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN).

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