

N.Va. Woman Aids Rescue Of Immigrants; Reporting Ransom Led To Stash House in Texas

The Washington Post

September 29, 2009 Tuesday, Met 2 Edition

Copyright 2009 The Washington Post All Rights Reserved



Distribution: Maryland

Section: METRO; Pg. B01

Length: 974 words

Byline: Josh White

Washington Post Staff Writer

Body

Eleven undocumented immigrants who were taken hostage by a violent Mexican smuggling cartel along the Texas border were saved last month after a Virginia woman reported to police that the group had her brother and was demanding thousands of dollars for his release. It was the third time this year that such ransom demands of a Northern Virginia resident have led federal agents to rescue hostages in secretive border stash houses, according to federal authorities.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents rescued Oscar A. Bertothy of Honduras and 10 others who were crammed into a second-floor room -- naked and with their mouths taped shut -- at a stash house in Houston on Aug. 29, according to federal court documents released last week. It was just one day after Bertothy's sister, of Springfield, called Fairfax County police to report that members of the cartel had extorted \$3,000 from her and wanted more or they would kill Oscar.

Such hostage-taking cases have increased along the southern U.S. border in recent years as Mexican cartels seek to boost profits by extorting the vulnerable immigrant relatives of those they help across the border. Many of those relatives are fearful of calling the police and know that, if they don't pay, their loved ones could be tortured or killed.

ICE officials and local police encourage those who receive ransom demands to report the situation immediately, as they have been able to quickly track the whereabouts of their loved ones. A Washington Post story, published five days before Bertothy's sister went to police, highlighted ransom victims in Prince William County and Alexandria who reported nearly identical schemes, ultimately saving dozens of hostages and leading to the arrest of their captors.

In Bertothy's case, his sister called the Fairfax County Police Department on Aug. 28 and said her brother had been smuggled into the country from Mexico and was being held against his will. Officer Don Gotthardt, a police spokesman, said there had been a demand for money and threats to do bodily harm.

N.Va. Woman Aids Rescue Of Immigrants; Reporting Ransom Led To Stash House in Texas

"We contacted federal authorities immediately and assisted them in the initial investigation," Gotthardt said. "We encourage the citizens of Fairfax County to report any criminal activity."

Although immigration officials realize that both the victims and the kidnappers have broken the law, they say they want to save lives first and sort out immigration status second.

After Fairfax police contacted the FBI, that agency contacted ICE in Northern Virginia.

Bertothy's sister came forward to police after paying two ransom demands of \$1,500 each, sending the money to Mexico via wire transfer. After a third demand -- this time for \$3,000 and accompanied by beatings of Oscar she could hear over the phone -- she called police for help. Authorities later recorded calls between the Springfield woman and the captors and worked around the clock in Virginia and Texas to track the calls to Houston.

Agents were at a house on Ashford Green Lane in Houston within 36 hours.

Three men were arrested there. They are alleged to have beaten hostages, sexually assaulted them, and held them naked and at gunpoint to prevent their escape, according to federal court documents.

ICE Special Agent Billy Bickham wrote in a criminal complaint that at least one victim was stuffed in a trash bag and held in a closet for days and that the victims generally were "in a state of terror" while held in the Houston home.

The defendants have been indicted on charges that could lead to sentences of life in prison.

"It is imperative that the families of victims contact ICE or their local law enforcement agency as soon as possible to assist in bringing the situation to a successful conclusion," said James Dinkins, special agent in charge of the office of investigations for ICE in the District and Virginia. "In this case, within 36 hours of ICE receiving the tip, 11 hostages were rescued from a deplorable situation."

One of the men charged in the case -- identified in court papers and a Justice Department statement as Alex Julca, 24, a U.S. permanent resident of Houston -- told ICE officials that he needed cash and agreed to rent out a room in his house for \$400 a month, only later learning that the renter, known only as "el Pelon," was keeping as many as 20 hostages in the room at a time. Julca told authorities that two other men acted as guards, made ransom demands and carried a gun. According to one victim who spoke to ICE, el Pelon allegedly has ties to "the Z's," a powerful militant smuggling cartel known in Spanish as los Zetas.

Julca's attorney, Houston assistant federal public defender Peter Bray, declined to comment on his client's pending case.

Another of the men charged in the case -- Rigoberto Vargas-Jaimes of Mexico -- told authorities that he was smuggled illegally into the United States on Aug. 15. Unable to pay his smuggling fees, Vargas-Jaimes was enlisted to help feed and guard hostages, something authorities have said is a relatively common occurrence. He was charged with harboring illegal immigrants.

Adrian Almaguer, a Houston attorney who represents Vargas-Jaimes, said the cartels have "gotten a bit wise" to the fact that such crimes carry federal penalties and have changed their tactics, often using people they have smuggled into the country, such as his client, as guards.

"They use third parties to guard these folks and make phone calls because they know if they get caught, they'll be the ones who go to jail," Almaguer said, adding that his client wanted to come to the United States to get a job and support his family back in Mexico. "It's very compartmentalized."

Those who are rescued are often returned to their home countries after they provide officials with testimony against their captors.

Staff researchers Meg Smith and Julie Tate contributed to this report.

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Subject: IMMIGRATION (91%); EXTORTION (90%); POLICE FORCES (90%); KIDNAPPING & ABDUCTION (90%); **RESCUE** OPERATIONS (90%); HOSTAGE TAKING (90%); SPECIAL INVESTIGATIVE FORCES (90%); SMUGGLING (89%); IMMIGRATION LAW (89%); INVESTIGATIONS (89%); FEDERAL INVESTIGATIONS (89%); ILLEGAL **IMMIGRANTS** (78%); CRIMINAL FALSE IMPRISONMENT (78%); BORDER CONTROL (78%); ARRESTS (78%); CARTELS (78%); LAW ENFORCEMENT (77%); COMPANY PROFITS (73%); WIRE TRANSFERS (61%)

Industry: WIRE TRANSFERS (61%)

Geographic: HOUSTON, TX, USA (79%); VIRGINIA, USA (94%); **TEXAS**, USA (92%); UNITED STATES (79%); NORTH AMERICA (79%)

Load-Date: September 29, 2009