

COUPLE PLEAD NO CONTEST IN IMMIGRANT FRAUD SCHEME

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Body

A month before they were set to go to trial, a San Jose **couple** accused of stealing more than a half million dollars from undocumented **immigrants pleaded no contest** this week to multiple felony charges in one of Santa Clara County's largest immigration **fraud schemes**.

Noel Ramayrat, 52, and Mercedes Alcantara, 46, according to prosecutors, operated two illegal immigration consulting offices in San Jose and bilked hundreds of undocumented **immigrants** from around the Bay Area.

Ramayrat, who remains in Santa Clara County Jail, **pleaded no contest** Monday to 61 felony counts of grand theft, payroll tax evasion and tax **fraud**. He faces up to six years in state prison.

Alcantara, who was released from jail Monday on her own recognizance, **pleaded no contest** to 28 felony counts of similar charges. She faces two to three years in prison.

A sentencing date has not been scheduled.

"I'm relieved that the system has worked and defendants have been held accountable and victims have been spared more trauma in court," said Deputy District Attorney Dale Lohman of the major **fraud** unit of the county prosecutor's office. "It sends the message that we will aggressively prosecute immigration **fraud**."

Ramayrat, according to court records, falsely represented himself as a lawyer and advised Mexican busboys and kitchen workers that they could apply for federal labor certification, green cards and amnesty when, in fact, they did not qualify.

The **couple** processed work visa applications from Mexican and Filipino **immigrants** who were seeking legal immigration status in the United States. They also operated a placement agency that falsely promised high-paying jobs that could lead to permanent residency in the U.S.

In all, the **couple** collected more than \$648,000 from their clients, for immigration benefits that many of the undocumented **immigrants** were not qualified to receive. Many of the victims are now facing deportation.

Immigration lawyers and **immigrant** advocates have watched the case closely since the **couple's** arrest in December 2002.

"What this tells us is there should be much more enforcement," said Mary Dutcher, immigration program director for Community Legal Services in East Palo Alto.

Ramayrat and Alcantara are likely to be ordered to pay restitution, but it's not clear how much.

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Ramayrat, who had insisted on his innocence from the beginning, expressed remorse through his attorney, Steven Woodson, of San Jose.

"He didn't mean to hurt anyone," Woodson said of Ramayrat. "He feels very badly for the people who are in a bad position."

Alcantara "had become weary of the process and was no longer of the mind to fight the charges," according to her court-appointed lawyer, Ric Squaglia of Fresno.

For some of the couple's victims, the end to the case could not have come sooner.

"It's about time. A lot of people have been waiting for this," said Ted Boda of San Jose, whose wife, Jessica, was briefly deported to Mexico after discovering that immigration papers filed by the couple were falsified.

Jessica Boda, who testified at the couple's preliminary hearing in January, now has a pending application for a green card.

Graphic

Photos (2);

PHOTO: Ramayrat

Faces up to six years in prison.

PHOTO: Alcantara

Faces three years in prison.

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