

SUSPECT IS SPOTTED IN MEXICO

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Body

The patriarch of a family operated people-smuggling ring that allegedly exploited deaf Mexicans in Queens was spotted yesterday in Mexico City.

Jose Reinaldo Paoletti and his son, Renato, have been subjects of an international manhunt since Saturday, when police raided two cramped apartments in Jackson Heights and rescued 57 deaf Mexicans who had been forced to peddle trinkets in city subways.

Seven other family members and alleged accomplices are in police custody.

Paoletti "was seen driving in a van with curtained windows," said Veronica Rodriguez-Torres, whose brother and two sisters were among those rescued. "He was identified by a member of my family, who has known him for 10 years." Officials directing the dragnet refused to comment on the Paoletti sighting.

"We would not be giving any confirmation or reaction to any information about a criminal case," said Mark Thorn, spokesman for the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

A high-ranking official from the PGR, the Mexican equivalent of the FBI, said only that the agency was tracking Paoletti's movements.

Rodriguez lives three blocks from where Paoletti keeps a second-floor apartment in a heavily guarded building in the working-class Tlanepantla neighborhood. Neighbors said Paoletti, 59, rarely spends any time there and lives mostly at his homes in the city of Mazatlan and Cuauhtlanlzcalli.

Less is known about his 20-year-old son, Renato, whom federal officials called a key player in the ring.

"He took care of the nuts and bolts, the details, of getting these people into New York," said one official.

Some 60 to 75 INS agents are working the investigation in New York, with another 25 or so investigating reports that deaf Mexicans also peddled trinkets in Chicago, Atlanta and Washington.

Reacting to reports that a city building inspector failed to spot alleged mistreatment of the Mexicans when he checked their Queens apartment, mayoral hopeful Ruth Messinger yesterday said Mayor Giuliani deserves the blame.

"This administration has cut building inspectors, and cut housing inspectors, and argued that it would have no impact," Messinger said at a campaign stop at the Hunts Point Terminal Market. "Guess what? Those are the wrong priorities."

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Giuliani dismissed Messenger's criticism as partisan sniping not grounded in fact.

"In fact, there were a number of inspections of this particular building, and for good reasons or bad reasons, the inspectors and the fire inspectors and others did not pick up the inhumane and indecent conditions that were going on there," Giuliani said.

The City Council Housing and Buildings Committee is slated to approve tougher penalties for illegal apartment conversions tomorrow. But panel chairman Archie Spigner (D-Queens) said "all the penalties in the world won't work if city inspectors don't do their jobs and rigorously enforce the laws that are on the books. And they didn't in the recent case in Queens."

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