

Van services a conduit for illegal immigrants

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution
August 21, 2005 Sunday, Home Edition

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The Atlanta Journal-Constitution
ajc.com

Section: News;

Length: 1951 words

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Body

Houston --- Thirteen migrants hand over their cash and bags and crowd into a van late on a Sunday for an all-night journey to Atlanta. Included in the \$300 to \$500 ticket price: Big Macs, limp fries, Cokes and Mexican music from an overused bootleg CD.

Crouching in stuffy togetherness, passengers who just days ago crossed the U.S.-Mexico border say little and sleep sitting up against piled bags. One is from Bolivia. There is a couple from Chiapas and a man from Tabasco, Mexico.

About 2:30 a.m., the van stops at a Mississippi rest area on I-10. The driver tells the riders they can go to the bathroom --- but only two at a time, and they have to hurry. When he spots a forest ranger in the parking lot, he gets upset and changes plans. As the first two return, he rushes them on board and gets back on the road.

"Why didn't you hurry?" he hollers in Spanish. "Didn't you see the cop there? What if he saw us?"

Six hours and two stops later, the van arrives in metro Atlanta and the bleary passengers pile out. After a quick bite, some will continue on to North Carolina and New York.

It's a far cry from the comfort of Greyhound, but it has one chief advantage: a better chance of avoiding immigration agents.

Experts say this is how the nation's 11 million illegal immigrants prefer to get around in the United States. Van services like this --- known as camionetas, after the Spanish word for van --- operate with little oversight from federal agencies, despite new safety rules and a continuing mandate to stop illegal immigration.

Camionetas are part of a loose-knit network of cottage industries profiting from immigrant smuggling. In Atlanta, they drop off passengers at unadvertised but well-known locations near Buford Highway, including a strip shopping center in Chamblee. A short walk away, police say, shady labor brokers and document sellers hawk what the immigrants need next: papers, a job, a place to sleep.

In this way, the network fills a constant demand for cheap labor in construction, agriculture, poultry and carpet manufacturing, all major Georgia industries.

Chamblee police Chief Marc Johnson has watched the van traffic. He worries about the illegal activity and passes tips to immigration officials. They tell him they're "working on it," he says, but nothing has come of it.

Van services a conduit for illegal immigrants

"They've been working on [identifying them] now for 10 years," he says.

As far back as the 1980s, camionetas traveled weekly between Texas cities and Monterrey, Mexico, ferrying legal and illegal immigrants. Border enforcement then was relatively casual. As it tightened in the mid-1990s, most camionetas switched to transporting customers within the United States.

Immigrant smugglers, meanwhile, grew bold enough to use airports as distribution hubs. By 1999, officials were watching smugglers troop lines of migrants, single file, to airline counters in Phoenix, pay cash for one-way tickets to other cities, and escort them to their gates.

Immigration officials responded in 2000 with Operation Denial, which netted thousands of arrests at airports in Phoenix and Las Vegas. Post-9/11 security upgrades made air travel even more difficult.

Smugglers reverted to land routes, often subcontracting camioneta companies. In the months after Operation Denial, state troopers in Colorado and Arizona reported more traffic stops yielding loads of illegal immigrants.

A Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration data base registers 533 camioneta companies in the United States, 26 of them in Texas. But Luisa Deason, spokeswoman for the U.S. Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, said more than 90 camioneta companies operate out of Houston alone.

They are not hard to find. Taxi drivers outside the Greyhound terminal in Houston easily directed a reporter arriving from Mexico to Delis Van Tours. A taxi took her, for free, to its darkened offices late at night. A sleepy caretaker let her into the waiting room. She spent the rest of the night sleeping on a couch. Two other passengers slept on bench seats salvaged from old vans.

She paid the \$300 fare in cash --- no checks or credit cards accepted, no receipt given. A comparable trip on Greyhound would have cost \$95. There was no scheduled departure time. The three spent the day watching television, playing pool and napping while waiting to leave.

Departure was pushed back from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m., then to 5 p.m., and then again to 7 p.m as drivers waited for enough passengers to fill a van. Finally, a driver took them to another van company, El Poder Van Tours, where he exchanged them for other passengers headed to a different destination to streamline routes. They left at 10 p.m.

Enforcement woes

There is almost no doubt that camionetas regularly carry illegal immigrants.

Primitivo Garza, an employee at El Piporro Vans in McAllen, a Texas border town, acknowledges the fact.

"At all the companies, people board who are not legal," he said. "But one doesn't know if a person has papers or doesn't have papers."

Deason said van companies, like buses and domestic airlines, don't check customers' citizenship before selling them a ticket. So there is nothing to prove complicity with smugglers.

It's the loophole operators rely on.

"I'm not a racist to go around asking people for papers. I could get sued for discrimination," said Felipe Carrillo, manager at El Poder. "We're only interested in the fare."

When asked about his driver's behavior on the Mississippi stop, Carrillo said he had not heard of the incident. He said he never had problems with immigration officials in four years of operating the company. FMCSA spokeswoman Gladys Cole said in an e-mail that her agency had not investigated El Poder, but its records showed it had been in business only since Aug. 4.

Garza, whose company shuttles passengers only from McAllen to Houston and Dallas, said a Honduran woman recently walked into his office with wet pants legs, presumably from crossing the nearby Rio Grande. He told her if

Van services a conduit for illegal immigrants

he sold her a ticket, agents would likely catch her at one of several checkpoints the Border Patrol sets up several miles away from the border. In the end, he left the choice to the driver. She left on the next van.

"My job is to sell the ticket to the person," Garza said.

David Ellis, a researcher with the Texas Transportation Institute who recently studied camionetas for the FMCSA, believes the camionetas knowingly work with smugglers to transport illegal immigrants within the U.S.

"Clearly, for some camioneta van owners, [carrying immigrants provided by smugglers] is a potentially significant portion of their business," Ellis wrote in his analysis.

Federal agents have tried sporadically to go after camionetas.

In operations in 1996 and 1997, U.S. Border Patrol officials arrested 250 illegal immigrants riding in camionetas during one 24-hour period and 383 over 48 hours, Ellis wrote.

The stops were not anomalous. Garza says agents regularly stop vans heading out of border cities and take passengers off for lack of papers.

Deason said Houston immigration officials investigated camionetas' links to smugglers in 1998. Their case yielded almost 100 arrests, mostly of passengers --- deportable immigrants who had entered the country illegally. Agents couldn't get them to name smugglers, so the investigation died there.

Federal prosecutors in Phoenix tried to go after a bus company for smuggling.

In 2001, they accused Los Angeles-based Golden State Transportation Co. of moving more than 42,000 illegal immigrants on a route from Tucson to Phoenix to Los Angeles. The company pleaded guilty in 2004 to six felony counts of conspiracy, paid a \$3 million fine and forfeited a \$2 million terminal. Then it went out of business. In June, an appeals court threw out wiretap evidence against Golden State owners Francisco and Antonio Gonzalez, weakening the government's smuggling case. Prosecutors are deciding their next step.

Meanwhile, in Chamblee, Chief Johnson uses his only weapon against camioneta companies: the city code.

Jacobo Tueme, owner of Los Primos Restaurant, where vans stop to let passengers eat, once allowed fare sales from his lunch counter. Johnson told him it was a zoning violation, and he stopped.

Tueme knows his customers are illegal immigrants. He says he has nothing to do with traffickers operating around him, but he fears they make him appear guilty by association.

"People are always saying that you can get anything you need at Los Primos," he said. "It's not true."

Risk to riders

They may not know it, but passengers risk their lives when they hop on camionetas. Despite federal rules, some hire improperly licensed drivers, keep inaccurate records and may not carry proper insurance. The vans themselves are prone to rollover accidents.

"I call them 'vandidos,' " said Al Penedo, president of Americanos USA, a bus line and Greyhound sister company that caters to Latino customers.

For the past four years, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration has issued warnings for the 15-passenger vans camioneta companies regularly use, which are almost three times as likely to roll over when full as when lightly loaded.

That's what happened to the National SuperExpress van that Mari Alvarenga, a Salvadoran migrant, rode in on Feb. 27, 2001. Alvarenga boarded in Houston, headed for Los Angeles. The van crashed between Dallas and Wichita Falls, Texas, killing her and a driver.

Van services a conduit for illegal immigrants

Alvarenga's brother, Guillermo, believes the smuggler who helped her cross was supposed to contract the camioneta. He never found out how the accident happened. He tried to sue National, but the case went nowhere, he said.

"What am I supposed to think?" he said. "They should be held responsible."

National SuperExpress is listed as inactive on the FMCSA database.

In September 2003, the FMCSA imposed new regulations for camionetas. Companies now have to carry \$1.5 million in liability insurance, keep driving logs and stay current on maintenance records. FMCSA spokesman Jim Lewis said the agency relies on state and local police to conduct roadside inspections during traffic stops, and regional FMCSA offices track repeat violators to close them down.

But records show troopers pulled vans from Houston-based Recondor Tours off the road at least four times since January for rules violations, including, on two occasions, the driver's lack of a commercial operator's license. Yet a June review rated the company satisfactory.

Cole said in her e-mail that the agency had conducted a previous review of Recondor in April, warning them to comply or risk getting an unsatisfactory rating that would put them out of service. The June review, she said, was a follow-up.

Cole said that tracking illegal immigrants was not the agency's mission, though it cooperates with Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Kenneth Smith, head of the Atlanta ICE office, says investigators are aware of camionetas in Atlanta and share information through a task force. But there are no open investigations.

One thing is certain --- the camioneta clientele remains loyal.

"I just like them better," said Andres Anastasio, 19, an illegal immigrant recently traveling from Atlanta to Chicago.

David Spener, associate professor of sociology at San Antonio's Trinity University, said ICE conducts raids at commercial bus terminals --- one reason for illegal immigrants to stay away. More importantly, family advice counts.

"Word of mouth is not to be underestimated," Spener said. "Most migrants already have relatives in the States that tell them what to do."

Graphic

JOHN SPINK / Staff Passengers climb out of a van at a strip mall off Buford Highway that serves as an unofficial bus stop. The small bus lines, known as camionetas, cater to immigrants and are part of a loose-knit network of cottage industries profiting from immigrant smuggling. ; TERESA BORDEN / Staff Primitivo Garza, an employee at El Piporro Vans in McAllen, Texas, says, "At all the companies, people board who are not legal. But one doesn't know if a person has papers or doesn't."

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Subject: IMMIGRATION (89%); ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS (89%); SMUGGLING (78%); US FEDERAL

Van services a conduit for illegal immigrants

GOVERNMENT (76%); TERRITORIAL & NATIONAL BORDERS (76%); BORDER CONTROL (76%); ALIEN SMUGGLING (73%); CITY GOVERNMENT (71%); POLICE FORCES (71%)

Company: DELIS **VAN** TOURS (65%); DELIS **VAN** TOURS (65%); A BETTER CHANCE (54%); A BETTER CHANCE (54%)

Organization: A BETTER CHANCE (54%); A BETTER CHANCE (54%)

Industry: POULTRY (72%); PARKING SPACES & FACILITIES (68%); CARPET & RUG MILLS (50%); FLOORING (50%)

Geographic: ATLANTA, GA, USA (91%); HOUSTON, TX, USA (79%); GEORGIA, USA (92%); NORTH CAROLINA, USA (79%); TEXAS, USA (79%); UNITED STATES (93%); MEXICO (92%); NORTH AMERICA (79%)

Load-Date: August 21, 2005

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