

## **Couple Held Two Servants Captive for Years, U.S. Says**

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### **Body**

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Federal prosecutors charged a wealthy Long Island **couple** on Tuesday with keeping **two** Indonesian domestic workers as virtual prisoners in their home for more than five years under conditions they called "modern-day slavery," beating one severely and paying them very little.

The **couple**, Varsha Mahender Sabhnani, and Mahender Murlidhar Sabhnani, 51, who the authorities **say** run a multimillion dollar perfume business from their home in Muttontown, pleaded not guilty to the charges at their arraignment here before Magistrate Judge Kathleen Tomlinson of **United States** District Court. They were charged under a federal law that makes it illegal to force someone to work under threat of violence.

Their lawyers, Charles A. Ross and Alexandra Tseitlin of Manhattan, **said** the accusations against the Sabhnanis amounted to nothing more than "an assault allegation."

Police and federal immigration agents developed the case against the **couple** after one of the women, identified only as "Samirah" in court papers, was seen wandering near a Dunkin' Donuts shop in Syosset on Sunday morning, wearing only pants and wrapped in a towel. Her face was bruised, and when shop employees tried to communicate with her, she made gestures of slapping herself and uttering what sounded to them like the word "master," prosecutors **said**.

The police took Samirah to Nassau University Medical Center, where, with the help of an Indonesian translator, she told them that she and a second woman, identified in papers only as "Nona," were forced by the Sabhnanis to work long hours, given little food, forced to sleep on mats on the floor, kept hidden when company came, threatened with violence, and in Samirah's case, frequently beaten by Mrs. Sabhnani.

In court documents, prosecutors **said** Samirah's employer had promised to pay her \$300 a month when they offered her a job in 2002 during a visit to Indonesia. They paid only \$100, however, and the money was sent directly to Samirah's daughter in Indonesia. Mrs. Sabhnani was also charged in the papers with having cut Samirah with a knife, burned her with cigarettes and subjected her to a series of tortures, in one instance forcing her to eat many hot chili peppers.

Immigration agents searched the family home on Monday, and found Nona hiding in a closet under the stairs. Prosecutors **said** she confirmed the story Samirah had told them. Both **servants held** temporary work visas that had expired.

Mr. and Mrs. Sabhnani, who have **two** daughters away at college and a younger son and daughter living at home, were **held** without bail yesterday pending a bail hearing scheduled for Thursday.

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Demetri M. Jones, an assistant United States attorney for the Eastern District, told Magistrate Tomlinson that the couple were a flight risk and should be held without bail for the duration of their prosecution because they had extensive business and family contacts throughout Asia.

But the defendants' lawyers said the couple were highly unlikely to flee since they had two homes here, a flourishing business, and four children born in the United States. "What we have here is one person's version of what happened," Mr. Ross said. "There are no allegations of slave trading. This is basically an assault allegation by one person."

He said the case would prove to be "much more involved and complicated" than the initial story told by the two servants to federal agents.

It is unusual for the employers of domestic servants to be charged under a 2000 federal law that bans human trafficking. Most prosecutions under that law have involved traffickers in prostitution.

Human rights advocates have said that domestic workers are often kept hidden away, and are rarely willing to risk deportation by seeking help.

Magistrate Tomlinson asked the lawyers to produce an accounting of the family's assets at Thursday's hearing.

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