

## ***U.S. breaks up Ukrainian immigrant smuggling ring***

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### **Body**

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Federal agents **broke** up a **ring** that **smuggled** hundreds of people from the Ukraine into the **United States** through Mexico and forced some into prostitution, authorities **said** Thursday.

Eleven Ukrainian people were arrested and eight others were fugitives, two in California and six in Ukraine or elsewhere, Assistant **U.S.** Attorney Dan Saunders **said**.

At least 200 people and perhaps as many as 2,000 were **smuggled** by the **ring**, he **said**. The **ring** charged \$7,000 per person, but they were often forced to pay more.

"Some of the aliens were young women who upon arrival were sold into prostitution," he **said**. "But there were also families, men and children."

An affidavit **said** the ringleaders were Serge Mezheritsky, 35, and Tetyana Komisaruk, 49, of Los Angeles. They were among those under arrest. Komisaruk's husband, two daughters and a son-in-law were charged as participants.

The **ring** was uncovered by chance after a Ukrainian family accidentally dropped a video camera on a known trail used by smugglers entering the **United States** from Mexico. The videotape showed the family, speaking in Ukrainian, documenting their trip for a family history.

"One of our uniformed agents discovered the video camera laying on the ground," Fernando Grijalva, supervising agent of the Border Patrol in San Diego, told a press conference at the FBI's Los Angeles headquarters.

Within a short time, Grijalva **said**, a Mexican-American guide was arrested **smuggling** five Ukrainians and a special investigation was launched. The probe began in 1999 and involved a sting operation.

The 11 under arrest were charged with conspiracy to **smuggle**, transport and harbor illegal **immigrants**. Under **U.S.** laws governing **smuggling** for profit, the defendants could face as much as three years in prison per **smuggled immigrant**, Saunders **said**.

Patrick Patterson, the agent in charge of the Los Angeles FBI office, **said** that at least 200 victims had been taken into custody by the Border Patrol and the Immigration and Naturalization Service. Some will be held as witnesses; others will face deportation hearings.

Patterson **said** that although the Ukrainians paid for Mexican tourist visas and knew they were being **smuggled** into the **United States**, they were considered to be victims because they were misled and forced into servitude once they arrived.

## U.S. breaks up Ukrainian immigrant smuggling ring

Patterson said the immigrants typically were brought to Mexico, came across the border by foot, car or boat, then were brought to a holding location in Los Angeles from which they were flown to their ultimate destinations across the United States.

Some were shipped to New York, Cleveland and Detroit, Saunders said.

The immigrants were typically charged \$7,000 for the smuggling fee, travel documents to Mexico, hotel accommodations and other expenses, Patterson said. But once they arrived, they were often told that the fee had been increased and they would have to pay thousands more.

"This investigation further underscores the global nature of crime today and the threats we now realize from abroad," said FBI Assistant Director James DeSarno. "What was a local crime just a few years ago now touches multiple countries"

Saunders said most of those who bought passage to the United States were seeking either economic betterment or wanted to be reunified with family members already in the country.

Those who were not forced into prostitution often were charged more but were allowed to travel to parts of the country where they had sponsors or could rejoin families, the prosecutor said.

A 109-page FBI affidavit outlined a conspiracy that used a travel agent in Kiev, maintained a Mexican villa at Rosarito Beach in Baja California, bought boats to transport aliens, and also brought them across the border in the trunks of cars and on trains.

The FBI tracked the conspiracy through extensive wiretaps on telephones and cellular phones, as well as intercepts of e-mail and faxes, the affidavit said.

It noted that a Ukrainian madam was found murdered in her San Fernando Valley apartment during the period of the conspiracy, and two Ukrainians, one of them a woman smuggled into the country, face charges in that killing.

The FBI document outlined a grandiose plan by Mezheritsky to form a prostitution ring in which women would bring him income of \$10,000 a day, and more money would come from blackmailing their clients with secret videotapes of sexual encounters.

But the affidavit said that after the murder Mezheritsky told an associate that the crime "just totally killed my business."

The conspirators allegedly used their families to launder money. The affidavit said a real estate agent charged in the case allegedly knew of the smuggling and prostitution businesses and devised arrangements for the purchase of homes and a resort at Big Bear Lake in the San Bernardino Mountains, which Komisaruk named "Russian Big Bear" and advertised to Ukrainians for vacations.

FBI spokesman Matthew McLaughlin said Mezheritsky owns a mansion and in 1997 unsuccessfully ran for the West Hollywood City Council.

Some smuggled women refused to be prostitutes and ran away, the affidavit said, and Komisaruk at some point allegedly discussed the possibility of tying or handcuffing them.

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U.S. breaks up Ukrainian immigrant smuggling ring

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