

3 Charged With Smuggling Deaf Mexicans

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Body

Federal authorities **charged** three men today with running an operation based in Southern California through which possibly hundreds of **deaf Mexicans** were **smuggled** across the border, kept briefly in a house here, then taken to New York City where they were held in virtual slavery and forced to peddle trinkets.

The United States Attorney in Brooklyn, Zachary W. Carter, announced the arrests of Andreas Pfeiffer and Hilario Pauletti, whom he identified as leaders of the Los Angeles **smuggling** ring, and Mr. Pauletti's son, Carlos Rivera, a midlevel manager.

The authorities described them as associates of the extended Paoletti family, a Mexico City-based clan whose members have been **charged** with holding 62 **deaf** illegal aliens in two safe houses in Queens.

At the same time, officials announced the arrest in Chicago of Pedro Santamaria on related **charges** of **smuggling** aliens. He is said to have supervised the trinket-selling activities of a group of illegal Mexican immigrants there before transporting them to New York to work in the Queens operation, which investigators now believe was closely linked to the Chicago group.

The arrests bring to 16 the number of people **charged** in the case, and Mr. Carter said that additional **charges** were expected.

"There are other cities that are being aggressively pursued," said one law-enforcement official who spoke on condition of anonymity. The official said evidence suggested it was possible that hundreds of illegal immigrants had been **smuggled** through the Los Angeles connection.

The suspects, who were arrested late Wednesday, were arraigned in Federal court here this afternoon on **charges** of transporting, harboring and concealing illegal immigrants. They were ordered held without bail at the request of an assistant United States attorney, Thomas D. Warren. They entered no pleas. A hearing was set for Aug. 8 about transferring them to Brooklyn to face **charges**.

At the arraignment today, Mr. Pfeiffer and Mr. Rivera refused to acknowledge their identity and were listed as John Does, Mr. Warren said. Court documents listed the name of one suspect as Hilario Paoletti, although the name was spelled Pauletti on his identification card, Mr. Warren said.

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Details on the arrests were sketchy, and prosecutors and immigration officials here and in New York declined to answer many questions about the latest suspects. But some details of the goings-on in a modest frame house on the edge of this city's bustling Koreatown emerged in court papers released by prosecutors in Brooklyn.

The court documents identified Hilario Paoletti, known as Lalo, as a cousin of the man authorities describe as the "boss" of the multicity organization, Renato Paoletti-Lemus, who is still at large. Renato is the son of the family patriarch, Jose Paoletti Moreda, a onetime commercial artist for the Mexican Communications Ministry who is himself deaf and who, the authorities say, built an empire that brought workers into the United States illegally.

The family came to Los Angeles in the mid- to late 1980's, relatives and associates said, and began using other deaf Mexican immigrants to help them sell trinkets around the city. But the Paolettis apparently grew fearful that advocates for the deaf would look askance at their work, and after Mr. Paoletti's daughter, Adriana Paoletti Lemus, moved to New York and found the market there more lucrative, the family moved its operations and expanded them in relative anonymity.

But Los Angeles remained the processing center for immigrants smuggled across the border outside San Diego. The authorities said that since at least 1995, Mr. Pfeiffer, a deaf, German-born man who married a Mexican woman and was known as Andy P. and the Butterfly, ran the house and assisted Lalo Paoletti by transporting immigrants to the home from Mexico, concealed in a van. Once here, they were put to work selling trinkets at Los Angeles International Airport and other locations. They returned to the house to sleep each night.

In the court papers, Lalo Paoletti was said to be the one who "orders the workers around," according to an informer familiar with the group's operations in New York and California. Carlos Paoletti, who is also deaf, once went to the Mexican border near San Diego to meet other members of the family from Mexico bringing illegal immigrants into this country, and then drove them to Los Angeles, the court papers say.

According to the court papers, Mr. Santamaria, an illegal immigrant, worked with the Chicago operation's leader, Norma Alcantara, who was arrested last week and charged with harboring illegal immigrants.

Investigators say that Mr. Santamaria accompanied Ms. Alcantara on trips from Chicago to New York to transport vendors to work in the New York ring, and also went to Mexico to bring back workers. One informer told the authorities that he was seen striking workers "when they did not bring in enough money."

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