

22 kidnap victims freed in San Marcos



Roger Croteau- Express-News 07/18/200

Four people have been charged with keeping 26 unauthorized immigrants against their will in a trailer home on the outskirts of San Marcos, allegedly threatening to kill them if their families didn't pay for their release.

Many of the immigrants were kept in their underwear, apparently in an attempt to discourage escapes, San Marcos Police Chief Howard Williams said.

“There were about 30 people in the trailer in two groups,” Williams said. “One group was the smuggling ring and the illegal aliens were in another room in their underwear so they couldn't run off.”

He said family members of the victims called police in San Marcos and Austin and reported that the smugglers had called them, demanding payment of various amounts — usually a couple of thousand dollars — or they would kill the immigrants.

Williams said law enforcement acted as quickly as possible because officials took the threat to kill the victims seriously.

He said three people who were arrested on aggravated robbery charges in an incident two months ago are related to some of the people arrested in Thursday's incident.

In the earlier case, a family member was bringing money to have his relative released by the men, and the exchange went badly. Shots were fired, but no one was injured.

“We identified the mobile home yesterday evening and it was less than two hours later that we made entry into the trailer,” Williams said.

Inside the trailer home, on Iris Street in the San Marcos Regency mobile home park, police found 22 unauthorized immigrants. Four others were found at a house in Staples after police followed an SUV that left the trailer park before the raid.

In all, 18 men and eight women from Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua and Mexico were turned over to Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

The men found in the trailer were wearing only underwear, while the eight women were in shorts and T-shirts, Williams said.

“It was not great conditions, but they were not immediately life-threatening,” Williams said. “It was hot. There was no air conditioning.”

He said nine of the immigrants were treated and released for minor injuries or health problems at Central Texas Medical Center.

After the raid, the first job was to get clothes for the victims, Hays County Sheriff Allen Bridges said. He said Wal-Mart donated shorts, shirts and flip-flops.

The team that conducted the raid was made up of several local and federal law enforcement agencies, he said.

Travis County sheriff's Lt. Terry Pickering said the raid went off largely without incident, although one man, likely one of the smugglers because he was clothed and outside the trailer, was able to run away and had not been found.

“When we went in, it was pretty much a reaction of complacency,” he said. “They did not appear scared. They did what we told them to do.”

Arrested were Rosalinda Alvarez Trevino, 32, of Staples; Maria Garcia Luz, 25, of Rio Grande City; Julio Salgado-Ortega, 26, of San Marcos; and Alejandro Guzman Ortega, 28, of San Marcos.

All were being held on a state charge of kidnapping, a third-degree felony, but federal charges may be added.

Bonds for Ortega and Salgado-Ortega had not been set late Thursday afternoon. Bond for Trevino and Luz was set at \$100,000 each. All four remained in Hays County Jail.

Vincent Iglie, the deputy special agent in charge for ICE, said some of the victims likely will be deported, while others will become witnesses in the case or have hearings to determine their status.

He said cases where a large group of unauthorized immigrants are kept in a home are more common south of San Antonio.

“It's unusual,” he said. “You don't see it too often here. As you would reasonably expect, as you move away from the border, they tend to disperse more.”