

4 charged after immigrant smuggling bust

26 people freed from San Marcos mobile home.

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SAN MARCOS — The bags of soda and beer cans that have piled up in the past month outside a neighbor's mobile home make sense now, said Dora Rodriguez, a resident of the San Marcos Regency Mobile Home Park.

Rodriguez and her children watched from their windows Wednesday evening, as law enforcement authorities freed 26 people from a neighboring home during what officials said was a multi-agency bust of an illegal immigrant smuggling ring.

Four U.S. and Mexican citizens were arrested and charged Wednesday with kidnapping, and officials said federal charges could follow as the investigation continues. Alejandro Guzman Ortega, 28, Julio Salgado-Ortega, 26, Rosalinda Alvarez Trevino, 32, and Maria Garcia Luz, 25, are being held at the Hays County Jail. Bail for each of them was set at \$1 million.

Four others suspected of being involved with the smuggling were detained on suspicion of being in the country illegally. Another suspect eluded arrest.

"I told the kids, 'It's like watching (the reality television show) 'Cops' live,' " Rodriguez said Thursday.

Law enforcement officials said they began watching the house after complaints were made to police in Austin and San Marcos.

The callers said their family members were being kept in the mobile home and that their captors wanted about \$2,000 in exchange for their release.

The mobile home's windows were covered with sheets, foil and spray-paint, and it didn't have air conditioning. Officials said they didn't know how long the group — which included citizens of Nicaragua, Guatemala, Mexico, El Salvador and Honduras — had been held there.

The men were found wearing only underwear, presumably so they wouldn't run away, San Marcos Police Chief Howard Williams said. The eight women in the group, including one who was pregnant, wore T-shirts and shorts.

Although a few of the immigrants were treated for dehydration, they appeared to have been given at least some food and water, Williams said. He said they could have been in the mobile home for a few days or longer.

One person — whom officers thought was one of the suspects — escaped during the bust, police said. Earlier as police watched the home, four possible suspects drove away in a sport-utility vehicle; they were later detained at a mobile home in Staples in Guadalupe County on suspicion of being in the country illegally. They have not been charged with a crime; however, officials said they suspect the four were also involved in the smuggling operation.

Vincent Iglia, a deputy special agent with Immigration and Customs Enforcement, said it's unusual to make such a bust so far north of the border. Usually, he said, a group of this size would have dispersed by the time they got to San Antonio.

"A load like this, unfortunately, is not as uncommon in South Texas," Iglia said.

In 2007, eight people were convicted in Austin of smuggling women into the U.S. and making them work as prostitutes in Austin brothels. And two Mexican citizens, Fernando Lopez-Ugarte and Ramiro Garduno-Sanchez, were convicted in 2006 in connection with an organization that smuggled hundreds of illegal immigrants into the city.

Wednesday's sting was conducted jointly by the San Marcos and Austin police departments, Hays and Travis county sheriff's offices, FBI and U.S. Marshals Service.

The immigrants did not appear scared or excited when officers brought them out of the mobile home, Travis County sheriff's Lt. Terry Pickering said Thursday. "It was pretty much a reaction of complacency."

Federal officials, who will handle the investigation, would not say where the 26 suspected illegal immigrants will be detained. Iglia said some will be returned to their countries, some might be called as witnesses at a possible criminal trial and some could be prosecuted.

Many mobile homes in the oak-shaded neighborhood had swing sets and children's toys in their small yards. Rodriguez said it's usually a peaceful area.

A few weeks ago, an older woman who lived in the mobile home where the bust took place had invited Rodriguez and her children to a pool party for the woman's grandchildren.

More recently, Rodriguez had even knocked on the woman's door to chat and give her some fish. Rodriguez said she didn't hear anything unusual at the time but did notice the extra trash.

"I just thought it was three ladies and (their) kids," she said.