



Kosovar, Deme Nikqi, extradited from Albania to US to face human smuggling charges

WASHINGTON — Deme Nikqi, of Peje, Kosovo, known by various aliases including "Hektor Kelmendi," has been extradited to the United States from Albania to face charges related to his leadership of an international human smuggling network.

The announcement was made by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Director John Morton; Assistant Attorney General Lanny A. Breuer, Justice Department's Criminal Division; and U.S. Attorney Loretta E. Lynch, Eastern District of New York.

Nikqi, 53, arrived in the United States today and is scheduled to be arraigned tomorrow before U.S. Magistrate Judge Viktor V. Pohorelsky in federal court in Brooklyn, N.Y., on a 28-count indictment that was filed on May 20, 2010, and unsealed yesterday. The case has been assigned to U.S. District Judge Nicholas G. Garaufis. Nikqi was apprehended by Albanian authorities on Oct. 4, 2011, on the basis of an Interpol Red Notice while he was crossing the border from Kosovo into Albania. The Albanian Ministry of Justice approved his extradition to the United States on Dec. 20, 2011.

The indictment, and a detention letter filed today, allege that from at least January 2006 through February 2010, Nikqi was the leader and organizer of an international criminal network dedicated to smuggling Kosovars from the Balkans into the United States via Latin America. Nikqi, who resided in Brooklyn in the 1990s and was previously denied permanent residence status in the United States, allegedly operated this smuggling enterprise from his home in Peje, Kosovo. According to court documents, Nikqi and his co-conspirators are estimated to have smuggled hundreds of individuals across the Mexican border and into the United States each year. One of Nikqi's smuggling operations allegedly resulted in the death of a Kosovar in Texas in 2010.

According to court documents, Nikqi typically charged individuals over 12,000 Euros each. In return, he would supply them with fraudulent passports and visas, as necessary, and arrange flights from various locations in Europe to Cancun, Mexico; San Jose, Costa Rica; and Buenos Aires, Argentina. Working with co-conspirators in these countries, Nikqi allegedly arranged overland transportation through Central America, Mexico and into the United States. Court documents allege that these journeys were often hazardous. Some people were hidden in the luggage compartments of buses and inside trailers, with little or no food or water. On Feb. 2, 2010, a car transporting three Kosovars and other Latin Americans crashed while being pursued by Texas Highway Patrol in the area of Laredo, Texas. One Kosovar and one Salvadoran national were killed, and several others in the same vehicle were severely injured.

"Tragically — as alleged in the court documents — this case shows yet again the dangers of the human smuggling trade," said ICE Director Morton. "To the smugglers, these people are simply a payday and they have no qualms about using whatever means and methods necessary to smuggle individuals into the United States. Thanks to the extraordinary teamwork and cooperation across international boundaries, today's extradition demonstrates law enforcement's commitment to identifying and prosecuting the individuals who play a role in these dangerous international human smuggling organizations."

"Mr. Nikqi is charged with leading an extensive human smuggling network," said Assistant Attorney General Breuer. "He allegedly conspired with others throughout the world to smuggle individuals from the Balkans into the United States through Latin America. Today's extradition reflects the high priority we place on cooperation with our foreign law enforcement allies in the pursuit of alleged criminals."

"As alleged, the defendant led an international criminal organization that promised hope and a new life to hundreds of people, but in reality exploited them for money, led them into danger, and presented a grave threat to our nation's borders. Transnational smuggling organizations such as those headed by Deme Nikqi are rightly viewed as a threat to national security, and will be vigorously prosecuted," stated U.S. Attorney Lynch. U.S. Attorney Lynch praised the ICE Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) offices in Dallas and New York, the office of the ICE HSI Attaché in Vienna, Austria and Rome, Italy, and the FBI field office in Laredo for their diligent and collaborative investigative efforts in this long-term investigation.

The investigation of Nikqi was conducted under the Extraterritorial Criminal Travel Strike Force (ECT) program, a joint partnership between the U.S. Department of Justice's Criminal Division and ICE. The ECT program focuses on human smuggling networks that may present particular national security or public safety risks, or present grave humanitarian concerns. ECT has dedicated investigative, intelligence and prosecutorial resources, and may also involve coordination with or assistance from other U.S. government agencies and foreign law enforcement authorities.

The government of Albania, the U.S. Embassies and the State Department's Regional Security Officers in Albania and Kosovo, and INTERPOL provided significant assistance and support during the arrest and extradition of Nikqi. The Department of Justice's Office of International Affairs worked with its counterparts in Albania to effect the extradition, and law enforcement authorities in Kosovo, including EULEX (the European Union Rule of Law Initiative), have also provided valuable assistance.

The charges contained in the indictment are allegations, and the defendant is presumed innocent unless and until proven guilty. If convicted, Nikqi faces a maximum sentence of life in prison.

This case is being prosecuted by Assistant U.S. Attorneys Cristina M. Posa and Amy Busa in the Eastern District of New York, and Trial Attorney Pragna Soni of the Criminal Division's Human Rights and Special Prosecutions Section.

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