

June 28, 2012
Laredo, TX

South Texas woman sentenced to 30 months in prison for human smuggling

LAREDO, Texas — A local woman was sentenced to 30 months in federal prison Thursday for her role in a conspiracy to transport and harbor illegal aliens, announced U.S. Attorney Kenneth Magidson, Southern District of Texas. The investigation was conducted by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) Homeland Security Investigations (HSI).

Petra Hernandez, 35, of Laredo, Texas, was also sentenced by U.S. District Judge George P. Kazen to serve three years of supervised release and 150 hours of community service. Judge Kazen also forfeited Hernandez's personal residence, which was used as a stash house and purchased with proceeds from the alien smuggling conspiracy spanning more than a decade. Hernandez pleaded guilty to the charges Sept. 7, 2011.

On July 10, 2011, HSI special agents executed a search warrant at Hernandez's residence and discovered 16 illegal aliens who had arranged to be smuggled to various parts of the United States. Hernandez was arrested and later indicted along with Rachele Lynn Munoz, 31, of Laredo, for harboring aliens at her home.

On Aug. 1, 2011, HSI special agents received information that a group of illegal aliens had been found in the brush by U.S. Customs and Border Protection's (CBP) Border Patrol. This information led special agents to suspect the person harboring them was Hernandez, who was out of jail on bond. She was again arrested, along with Nancy Rodriguez, 29, also of Laredo.

The indictment was later superseded charging Hernandez, Munoz and Rodriguez with conspiracy to harbor and transport aliens, and four substantial counts of harboring and transporting aliens. Hernandez subsequently pleaded guilty to one count of alien smuggling conspiracy. At the plea hearing, Hernandez admitted to being involved in transporting and harboring aliens from August 2001 through August 2011, and having used the proceeds from the illegal activities to fund a lavish lifestyle, including purchasing a house with cash and a cashier's check.

Munoz and Rodriguez also pleaded guilty to separate counts of alien transporting and alien harboring, and are awaiting sentencing. Munoz was released on bond pending sentencing. Rodriguez will remain in federal custody as an illegal alien subject to deportation after the judicial proceedings.

Hernandez had been on bond awaiting sentencing. However, on May 21, HSI special agents again found her harboring five illegal aliens. She was indicted on those charges June 5, and is currently pending trial on that case. She will remain in custody.

Assistant U.S. Attorneys Sonah Lee and D.J. Young, Southern District of Texas, prosecuted the case. Assistant U.S. Attorney Mary Ellen Smyth handled the asset forfeiture matter.

<http://www.ice.gov/news/releases/1206/120628laredo.htm>