

LOCAL // HOUSTON

Leader sentenced for operation that extorted families of migrants held captive in Houston

By **Cabrielle Banks** Staff writer



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There have been 2,800 stash house raids in the Houston area in the past five years, including this 2014 raid at a home in Southeast Houston. Smugglers often keep their clients in squalid conditions and under armed guard – and in some cases they extort relatives for additional funds.

Cody Duty, Staff / Houston Chronicle

Two stash houses on the outskirts of Houston were the excruciating endpoint of migrant journeys to the U.S. An international human smuggling operation threatened to kill, chop into pieces and disappear people held captive there if their families didn't cough up additional fees.

The man who rented the stash houses and commanded the local operation, Jose Nuñez-Arellano, was sentenced to 5½ years in federal prison Wednesday in Houston. A federal prosecutor asked U.S. District Judge Ewing Werlein to drop four remaining charges against him, as part of plea agreement.

The defendant apologized, through a translator, for his actions, saying he was trying to cover the cost of his brother's treatment and hospitalization for an illness.

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Defense attorney Alexander Jordan Houthuijzen asked the judge to sentence him to the low-end of the guideline range given his admission of guilt and genuine remorse.

Werlein opted for the higher end of the sentencing range, noting the quantity of weapons and ammunitions officials had found at the stash houses. The judge said that in addition to these charges, the 32-year-old had been deported five times in a single year to his native Mexico, demonstrating he had little respect for the law.

Nuñez-Arellano pleaded guilty in November to conspiring to transport and harbor between 25 and 99 migrants migrants during a three-month stretch in the summer

and fall of 2018. Known as Manuel or Viejon, the defendant admitted he'd been involved in the ring for seven months and, during the relevant time period, he'd picked up groups of migrants in San Antonio.

Four co-defendants previously pleaded guilty to aiding in the scheme. Ismael Rodriguez-Serrano and Daniel Lopez-Garcia were both sentenced to just under three years in prison, Joel Osornio-Cruz was given a 20-month term and Paulino Rios-Garcia was sentenced to time served.

Evidence in the case indicates that scouts, drivers, brush guides and money handlers were also involved.

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Human rights groups say that threats, exploitation, violence often occur in an echo chamber during these journeys because migrants who enter the country through illegal channels and relatives who finance their journeys are less likely to contact law enforcement.

Richard Bennett, the Houston federal prosecutor on the Nuñez-Arellano case, said with the exception of the weapons cache, the operation was not rare.

“This happens a lot, but the way this was found was not so common,” Bennett said. “Situations where aliens are being held for completion of payments and they’re being threatened, that takes place more than we think, but finding those stash houses takes some work.”

The case came to light when the sister of one of the smuggled immigrants contacted law enforcement to report she’d been told by a caller in Houston to send \$7,000 if she wanted to see her brother alive. If she told police about the caller’s threat, the man said, she’d be killed.

Ilsia Mazariegos-Salazar eventually told Homeland Security investigators she had already paid human traffickers in Guatemala \$8,500 to shuttle her brother Migdael across two international borders.

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She told them a man calling himself El Sobrino, the Nephew, had threatened to have Migdael “killed, chopped up into pieces and disappeared” if she didn’t come up with the money.

Federal officials then staged an undercover hand-off of money for the brother's freedom, which led to a stake out at a second stash house, and ultimately the arrest of the defendants. A relative of the crew's leader, Huber Nuñez-Arellano, remains a fugitive charged with two counts of conspiracy to transport and harbor migrants in the scheme.

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Gabrielle Banks was an assistant metro editor at Houston Chronicle, where she supervised a team of reporters covering inequity and communities of color. She previously reported on criminal justice and legal affairs for more than two decades, including staff work at the Houston Chronicle, the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette and The Los Angeles Times, and freelance work for The New York Times, The Mercury News, Newsday and The Miami Herald. She was on the Chronicle team that was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for its coverage of Hurricane Harvey. She has been a frequent guest on "Houston Matters" and "The Texas Standard," broadcast on NPR stations. She taught journalism at USC Annenberg School. Before entering journalism, she worked as a teacher, social worker and organizer. She is a third-generation Californian living in relative harmony with a Pittsburgher and a Houstonian.

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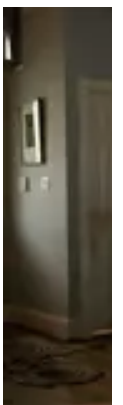
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