Department of Justice
U.S. Attorney's Office
Southern District of Texas
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# Three Sentenced to Federal Prison for Forcing Labor and Distributing Pirated/Counterfeit CDs and DVDs

HOUSTON – Three people have been sentenced by United States District Court Judge Ewing Werlein for conspiring to force labor and conspiring to distribute pirated CDs and DVDs, United States Attorney Kenneth Magidson announced today. Yesterday, Estela Aguilar-Lopez, 59, Blanca Estela Lopez-Aguilar, 37, Francisco Ivan Rodriguez-Garcia, 35, all of Houston, received 46, 50 and 57 months in federal prison, respectively.

On Aug. 30, 2010, Harris County Sheriff's Office (HCSO) deputies received information that illegal aliens were being held against their will at a residence located on the 10000 block of Woodico Court in Houston, which was being rented by the three defendants. Deputies came into contact with two female individuals at the location and, upon investigation, determined they were potentially victims of human trafficking. One of the females was an undocumented alien who had been smuggled into the U.S. for $2500.

During the investigation, investigators determined that Aguilar-Lopez, Lopez-Aguilar and Rodriguez-Garcia as well as other un-indicted co-conspirators were running an illegal human smuggling operation. Specifically, and according to court records, investigators learned that the trafficking organization was recruiting illegal aliens from Mexico to the United States. The trafficking organization would pay the undocumented alien's smuggling fee to get to the U.S. and would then require they pay off their smuggling debt by selling pirated CDs and DVDs in apartment complexes.

According to the superseding indictment, the undocumented aliens were forced to live with the traffickers and if they did not pay their debts, they were assaulted, threatened with violence and intimidated due to threatening phone calls to family members in Mexico.

All three defendants pleaded guilty on April 22, 2011, to conspiring to force labor and conspiring to distribute pirated CDs and DVDs. They have remained in custody without bond since their arrest on Aug. 30, 2011, where they will remain pending transfer to a Bureau of Prisons facility to be determined in the near future.

This matter was investigated by HCSO, the Texas Attorney General's Office, FBI and Homeland Security Investigations as part of the Human Trafficking Rescue Alliance (HTRA). The HTRA was formed by the United States Attorney's office in Houston as part of a broader effort by the Department of Justice to concentrate resources from its Civil Rights Division, our own office, federal, state law and local enforcement agencies and non-governmental

service organizations to target human traffickers while providing necessary services to those victimized by the traffickers. The Houston HTRA was the 5th of 42 such formed organizations and the first of its kind in Texas. The mission of the HTRA is to foster the collaboration of local, state and federal law enforcement agencies with area social service organizations to identify and assist the victims of human trafficking and to effectively identify, apprehend and prosecute those engaged in trafficking offenses.

The case was prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorneys Kebharu Smith, Ruben Perez and Joe Magliolo.