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NOVEMBER 29, 2021 • WASHINGTON, DC • WORKSITE ENFORCEMENT

Human trafficking, forced labor charges are first under ICE's new labor exploitation program focusing on abusive employers

WASHINGTON – A newly unsealed indictment [charging 24 individuals](#) with labor trafficking of Mexican and Central American workers under brutal conditions on South Georgia farms is the first investigation by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) under the new labor exploitation model.

As directed by the Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), ICE has ended mass work enforcement operations, where the threat of arrest and deportation has long been used by exploitative employers to suppress and retaliate against workers' assertion of labor laws.



“Unauthorized workers should never be afraid to report unlawful labor practices such as substandard wages, unsafe working conditions, and other forms of worker exploitation,” said Acting HSI Executive Associate Director Steve Francis. “By focusing on exploitative employers, HSI is protecting the American labor market, the conditions of our country’s workplaces, and the dignity of the individual workers.”

To align worksite investigation with ICE’s victim-centered approach to investigations, HSI has shifted to its posture to a new model focused on unscrupulous employers who exploit noncitizens, based on their lack of lawful immigration status, through dangerous work conditions, underpayment, and using those noncitizens as a “business model” to maximize profits.

The newly unsealed, 54-count indictment in Georgia – “Operation Blooming Onion,” led by HSI – documents dozens of victims of modern-day slavery who were brought into the United States to be exploited under inhumane conditions as agricultural laborers.

“For victims and witnesses who cooperate with HSI special agents, we will work to allay any concerns by considering the use of deferred action, continued presence, parole, and other available relief for noncitizens, making a concerted effort to ensure that they are not placed in immigration proceedings during the pendency of an investigation or prosecution,” said Francis. “We encourage noncitizen victims and witnesses to assist HSI with criminal investigations and prosecutions.”

According to the indictment, the conspirators required the workers to pay unlawful fees for transportation, food, and housing while illegally withholding their travel and identification documents and subjected the workers “to perform physically demanding work for little or no pay, housing them in crowded, unsanitary, and degrading living conditions, and by threatening them with deportation and violence.”

Exploitation of the workers included being required to dig onions with their bare hands, paid 20 cents for each bucket harvested, and threatened with guns and violence to keep them in line. The workers were held in cramped, unsanitary quarters and fenced work camps with little or no food, limited plumbing and without safe water. The conspirators are accused of raping, kidnapping and threatening or attempting to kill some of the workers or their families, and in many cases sold or traded the workers to other conspirators. At least two of the workers died as a result of workplace conditions.

These activities took place within Georgia, Florida, Texas, Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and elsewhere. The indictment alleges that the conspirators and their associates “engaged in mail fraud, international forced labor trafficking, and money laundering, among other crimes,” fraudulently using the H-2A work visa program to smuggle foreign nationals from Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras into the United States under the pretext of serving as agricultural workers.

The conspirators are alleged to have reaped more than \$200 million from the illegal scheme, laundering the funds through cash purchases of land, homes, vehicles, and businesses; through cash purchases of cashier’s checks; and by funneling millions of dollars through a casino.

The indictment also alleges that three of the conspirators attempted to intimidate and persuade a witness to lie to a federal grand jury and deny any knowledge of the illegal activities of the organization.

More than 200 law enforcement officers and federal agents from around the United States convened in the Southern District of Georgia to execute more than 20 federal search warrants at target locations.

In addition to HSI, other agencies involved are: U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, Fraud Detection and National Security; the U.S. Department of Labor Office of Inspector General, and Wage and Hour Division; U.S. Department of State’s Diplomatic Security Service; the FBI; the U.S. Postal Inspection Service; and the U.S. Marshals Service, with assistance from the Georgia National Guard; the Georgia Bureau of Investigation; the Georgia State Patrol; the Coffee County Sheriff’s Office; the Chatham County Sheriff’s Office; the Tattnall County Sheriff’s Office; the Bacon County Sheriff’s Office; and the Tift County Sheriff’s Office.

HSI is a directorate of ICE and the principal investigative arm of DHS, responsible for investigating transnational crime and threats, specifically those criminal organizations that exploit the global infrastructure through which international trade, travel, and finance move. HSI’s workforce of over 10,400 employees consists of more than 7,100 special agents assigned to 220 cities throughout the United States, and 80 overseas locations in 53 countries. HSI’s international presence represents DHS’s largest investigative law enforcement presence abroad and one of the largest international footprints in U.S. law enforcement.

Updated: 02/25/2025

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