



Department of Justice

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FORMER U.S. CONSULATE EMPLOYEES PLEAD GUILTY TO CONSPIRACY **TO COMMIT VISA FRAUD**

WASHINGTON, D.C. -- Assistant Attorney General Michael Chertoff of the Criminal Division and United States Attorney Michael Shelby of the Southern District of Texas announced today that four former employees at the U.S. Consulate in Nuevo Laredo, Mexico, have pleaded guilty to conspiracy to commit visa fraud.

The four defendants – former visa adjudicator Miguel Partida and former visa clerks Sergio Genaro Ochoa-Alarcon, Benjamin Antonio Ayala-Morales, and Ramon Alberto Torres-Galvan – entered their guilty pleas before U.S. District Court Judge Keith P. Ellison today at federal court in Laredo, Texas. They had been charged in one-count criminal informations with conspiracy to sell visas.

The four defendants face a maximum five years in prison as a result of their guilty pleas. Sentencing will be determined at a later date. Partida, 41, was arrested Feb. 5, 2003, but has been released on bail. Ochoa-Alarcon, 31, Ayala-Morales, 34, and Torres-Galvan, 34, have been in custody since their arrests on Jan. 30, 2003. Sentencing for all four defendants is scheduled for June 12, 2003.

The guilty pleas arose from a criminal investigation that began approximately seven months ago, and ultimately resulted in the closure of the U.S. Consulate office in Nuevo Laredo, Mexico, on Jan. 29, 2003. As part of a plea agreement, the defendants are cooperating with an ongoing criminal investigation.

According to documents filed at federal court in the Laredo Division of the Southern District of Texas, federal agents initiated the investigation after allegations that consulate employees were involved in a scheme to provide visas and border crossing cards in exchange for money. The scheme involved people buying visas without required interviews, and without the required determination that a person was qualified for a visas. The duties of the four men who pleaded guilty included interviewing applicants for U.S. visas, reviewing the applications, and approving non-immigrant visas for travel to the United States.

"Today's pleas are especially critical in light of our efforts to secure our borders and protect the national security," said Assistant Attorney General Michael Chertoff. "Those who sell entry to the United States for their own profit will be caught and punished."

The investigation into visa fraud at the Nuevo Laredo Consulate is being conducted by Special Agents

of the Diplomatic Security Service, United States Department of State, and Special Agents of the newly created Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services, Department of Homeland Security. The criminal case is being prosecuted by Trial Attorney Peter Zeidenberg of the Department of Justice, Criminal Division, Public Integrity Section; Jim Oliver of the Criminal Division's Domestic Security Section; and Assistant United States Attorney Dixie Morrow of the Laredo Division office of the United States Attorney for the Southern District of Texas.

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