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*United States Attorney
Southern District of Texas*

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MEMBERS OF FIREARMS TRAFFICKING RING INDICTED

(HOUSTON) — An 11-count superseding indictment charging 10 defendants with conspiracy to make false material statements in connection with the acquisition of firearms was unsealed today following the arrest and appearance of eight of the 10 defendants charged, acting United States Attorney Tim Johnson and Special Agent in Charge Dewey Webb of the Houston office of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) announced today. Warrants remain outstanding for two fugitives.

Three of the 10 charged in the superseding indictment, Jesus Saul Pineda, 26, Miguel Angel Pineda, 22, and Juan Manuel Pineda, 24, who are brothers, were each charged in the original indictment with making false material statements to acquire a large quantity of firearms including numerous Bushmaster-manufactured .223 caliber semi-automatic rifles and FN Herstal-manufactured pistols and rifles chambered in the 5.7 x 28mm caliber.

In the superseding indictment just unsealed, these three defendants are charged with the same conspiracy offense along with seven other defendants, including Christian Joel Garza, 27, Emmanuel Contreras, 24, Hector Quintana, 25, Reginald Keith Menefee, 23, Jecorey Dwann McGrough, 28, Robert Allen Meachum, 27, and Rodrigo Garza II, 28, all of the Houston area, who, in combination, allegedly acquired approximately 150 firearms between March 2006 and July 2007, which were intended to be smuggled into Mexico for use by Mexican drug trafficking organizations. Many of these firearms listed in the indictment have been recovered at crime scenes in Mexico, but the whereabouts of most of other weapons remains unknown. The conspiracy to make false material statement to acquire a firearm carries a maximum term of five years imprisonment and/or a fine not to exceed \$250,000 upon conviction.

Garza and Contreras were arrested on Wednesday, May 13, and appeared before a U.S. Magistrate Judge the same day. Garza was ordered temporarily detained pending a detention hearing on Tuesday, May 19, while Contreras was ordered released on bond. The Pineda brothers appeared in federal court today for arraignment and have been continued on bond. Quintana, Menefee and Meachum, each of whom had been served with a summons to appear in federal court for arraignment today, did so and have been ordered released on bond. Garza II and McGrough remain at large. A warrant has issued for their arrest.

Garza is also charged with eight counts of aiding and abetting various co-defendants in their making false material statements to federal firearms licensees to acquire firearms. Each of these counts carries a maximum term of 10 years imprisonment and/or a \$250,000 fine upon conviction. Garza is charged alone in the eleventh count of the indictment with dealing in firearms without a license which carries a maximum term of five years imprisonment and a fine not to exceed \$250,000.

The investigation leading to the charges was initiated by the ATF after a routine regulatory inspection of a local firearms dealer's records showed the cash purchases of a large number of military-style firearms in 2006 and 2007, including numerous assault rifles which were essentially identical civilian variants of the M-16 rifle used by the United States military. Other weapons frequently bought were also of military style and utility, including some firearms chambered in 5.7 x 28mm ammunition, which is a round reputed to defeat body armor worn by police and which weapons are known as "mata policias" or "police killers" in Mexican drug trafficking organization circles. Each of the defendants is accused of making false statements on the ATF forms — which they were required to fill out before buying the firearms — when they claimed they were not buying the firearm on behalf of another person when they actual were. Federal law prohibits one person from purchasing firearms on another's behalf except as a bona fide gift.

The indictment also seeks to forfeit the interest of each of the 10 defendants in a total of 151 firearms allegedly obtained in violation of federal firearms law.

This prosecution represents a continuing effort on the part of United States law enforcement to stem the flow of firearms from Texas and other states into Mexico where firearms of American origin are arming the drug trafficking organization henchmen who daily threaten and attack Mexican military, law enforcement and civilians with equal impunity and ruthlessness.

This matter was investigated by the special agents of the ATF and prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorney Mark W. White III.

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