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Feds make arrests in international firearms trafficking probe

FRESNO, Calif. – Seven defendants have been indicted on federal criminal charges for their alleged role in a central California firearms trafficking ring suspected of smuggling several hundred guns to Mexico over a three-year period.

The 16-count indictment, handed down earlier this month and unsealed Wednesday, charges the seven individuals with various federal firearms offenses. Those named in the indictment include: Ernesto Salgado-Guzman, 44; Demetrio Sebastian Cortez-Ordaz, 44; Zeferina Salgado de Cortez, 40; Demtrio Cortez-Ordaz, 33; Modesto Santiago-Sanchez, 72; Victorino Epifanio Bazante Pacheco, 75; and Florencio Solanes-Morales, 69, all of Madera, Calif. Zeferina Salgado Guzman de Cortez and Florencio Morales-Solano were taken into custody late Tuesday on federal arrest warrants. The remaining defendants are being sought by federal agents.

In a related action, Gregorio Salgado-Lopez, 33, of Madera, Calif., was arrested on an international provisional arrest warrant requested by Mexican authorities, who are seeking his extradition to face gun smuggling charges in Mexico.

This case is the product of a far-reaching, two-year probe involving U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) Homeland Security Investigations (HSI), the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) and various Mexican law enforcement agencies. The investigation began in 2009 based on information provided by Mexican authorities shortly after Salgado-Lopez's arrest in Mexico.

According to the indictment, the defendants conspired to buy and sell firearms without a license and presented false information during firearms transactions. The indictment charges that between 2006 and June 22, 2009, the defendants purchased more than 400 .22-caliber rifles from a Madera gun shop to be resold in Mexico. The indictment also charges Demetrio Cortez-Ordaz with exporting firearms to Mexico in violation of the Arms Export Control Act. The indictment further alleges that more than 50 of the firearms were recovered in Mexico in March 2009 when authorities stopped a Oaxaca-bound bus carrying Salgado-Lopez and found the weapons in his possession.

"The transportation of American firearms to Mexico contributes to violence south of the U.S. border, which threatens the safety of people in both countries," said U.S. Attorney Benjamin B. Wagner. "We have worked closely with Mexican law enforcement authorities in the course of this investigation, which began with information provided by Mexican authorities following a seizure of illegal weapons in Mexico in 2009. The U.S. Attorney's Office thanks Mexican authorities for their assistance and close coordination in this case. We will continue to collaborate with our Mexican partners to stanch the illegal flow of guns from this country to Mexico."

"The danger to our communities is minimized when ATF works in concert with our law enforcement partners and we jointly leverage our areas of expertise," said Stephen C. Herkins, special agent in charge of ATF's San Francisco field division. "Today's arrests demonstrate the great results that can be achieved through our close cooperation with our Mexican counterparts."

"The federal regulations involving the sale and export of firearms are designed to ensure that guns and other weapons don't fall into the wrong hands and put people at risk," said Clark Settles, special agent in charge for ICE Homeland Security Investigations in northern California. "As this case makes clear, we are allied in our effort to target those who seek to profit by circumventing these laws without regard for the public's safety."

"The United States Marshals Service joined in this cooperative effort, bringing our fugitive apprehension capabilities to support the ATF, ICE and Mexican government authorities in locating and arresting defendants wanted both by U.S. Federal courts and by Mexican federal authorities on a variety of weapons related charges," said Albert Najera, U.S. Marshal for the Eastern District of California. "Task force officers from the Marshals Service have specific skills, abilities and local knowledge to assist our federal law enforcement partners in this important and unique investigation."

The defendants were expected to make their initial appearances before a U.S. Magistrate Judge in Fresno Wednesday.

If convicted, Ernesto Salgado-Guzman and Demetrio Sebastian Cortez-Ordaz face a maximum sentence of 20 years in prison and a \$1 million fine. Demetrio Cortez-Ordaz faces a maximum sentence of 40 years in prison and a \$2.5 million fine. Zeferina Salgado Guzman de Cortez faces a maximum sentence of 10 years in prison and a \$500,000 fine. Modesto Santiago-Sanchez and Victorino Epifanio Bazante Pacheco face a maximum sentence of 10 years in prison and a \$500,000 fine. The maximum sentence for Florencio Morales-Solano is 15 years in prison and a \$750,000 fine.

The charges are only allegations and the defendants are presumed innocent until and unless proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt.

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