



# MAJOR GUATEMALAN HUMAN SMUGGLING OPERATION BUSTED IN ARIZONA, CALIFORNIA - THE CENTER SQUARE

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*Photo: Immigration and Customs Enforcement website*

One of the largest human smuggling operations in U.S. history has been dismantled by federal and local law enforcement officers.

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Border Patrol and Inglewood Police investigators in California launched an investigation that led to the arrests of four Guatemalan human smuggling ringleaders who were all living illegally in the U.S.

They were charged and indicted on multiple counts for orchestrating what law enforcement said was one of the largest human smuggling organizations in America.

They were indicted on charges of smuggling roughly 20,000 Guatemalans into the U.S. over a period of five years. Overall, the smuggling operation was active for roughly 12 years nationwide, according to a recently unsealed [indictment](#).

Authorities arrested the alleged ringleader, Eduardo Domingo Renoj-Matul, and his alleged right-hand man, Cristobal Mejia-Chaj, in the Westlake neighborhood of Los Angeles. They were arraigned the same day, ordered jailed without bond; a trial is set for next month.

Two others charged include Guatemalans Helmer Obispo-Hernandez, a lieutenant in the criminal organization who remains a fugitive, authorities said, and Jose Paxtor-Oxlaj, a driver for the smuggling organization.

Paxtor-Oxlaj is currently incarcerated in Oklahoma for causing a November 2023 car accident that killed seven, authorities said, including three minors in Elk City, Oklahoma. The accident occurred during a smuggling operation when he was transporting illegal foreign nationals from New York to Los Angeles, authorities said. He was arrested and charged in the Western District of Oklahoma.

He had previously been removed from the U.S. in 2010 and illegally reentered as a gotaway – those who illegally enter between ports of entry and intentionally evade capture. A record more than two million gotaways illegally entered the U.S. under the Biden administration, The Center Square [exclusively reported](#).

Each of the four Guatemalan men were charged with “conspiracy to bring aliens to the United States, transporting aliens in the United States, and harboring aliens in the United States for private financial gain and resulting in death,” according to the indictment.

Renoj-Matul and Mejia-Chaj were also charged with two counts of **h**ostage-taking. According to the indictment, from April 2024 to July 2024, they held hostage two Guatemalan nationals who were smuggled into the U.S. who hadn't paid their smuggling fees and allegedly threatened to kill them until third parties paid for their release.

In a separate and more recent complaint, Obispo-Hernandez was charged with threatening to cut off the heads of an ICE task force officer and his family members. He allegedly made the threats after search warrants were executed at his residence.

The Renoj-Matul transnational criminal organization operated for at least a dozen years, specializing in smuggling Guatemalans into the U.S., primarily transporting illegal foreign nationals from Phoenix to Los Angeles, according to the indictment.

Renoj-Matul's associates based in Guatemala allegedly solicited Guatemalans to come to the U.S., charging between \$15,000 and \$18,000 for each to be smuggled into the U.S., investigators say. Once they reached Mexico, Mexican cartel smugglers transported them through Mexico and across the U.S.-Mexico border in Arizona. They were then held hostage in stash houses in Arizona and eventually picked up by Renoj-Matul's lieutenants, according to the indictment.

For an additional fee, the smuggled Guatemalans paid to be transported throughout the U.S., including to Los Angeles. Those who couldn't pay were allegedly held hostage in a stash house in the Westlake neighborhood near downtown Los Angeles, according to the complaint.

Renoj-Matul also orchestrated a process for the human smuggling proceeds to be transported from Los Angeles to Phoenix, given to Mexican smugglers "to pay the expenses incurred by Renoj-Matul's transnational criminal organization," according to the complaint.

If convicted of all charges, each of the four Guatemalan ringleaders face a maximum sentence of death or life imprisonment.

Authorities also arrested two additional illegal foreign nationals and alleged lieutenants in the Renoj-Matul transnational criminal organization. Rolando Gomez-Gomez, who was previously deported, was arrested in South Los Angeles, charged with "one count of being an illegal alien found in the United States following removal." Juan Lopez Garcia was arrested in Downtown Los Angeles on a civil removal matter.

The smuggling bust occurred after a record nearly one million Guatemalans illegally entered the U.S. under the Biden administration, The Center Square [reported](#).