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## Southern georgia slavery ring

David H. Estes, Acting U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of Georgia, speaks during a news conference Nov. 22, 2021, to announce indictments in USA v. Patricio et al. Operation Blooming Onion, a human trafficking investigation naming 24 defendants on felony charges including human smuggling and document fraud. With Estes are (from left) Katrina Berger, Special Agent in Charge of the Atlanta Office of Homeland Security Investigations; Michael Imperatrice, Resident Agent in Charge, Savannah HSI Office; Jessica Moore, Chief of the Criminal Investigation Division for the U.S. Department of State's Diplomatic Security Service; Rafiq Ahmad, Special Agent in Charge of the Atlanta Regional Office of the U.S. Department of Labor Office of Inspector General; Henry Deblock, Savannah Area Port Director for U.S. Customs and Border Protection; George "Will" Clarke, Supervisory Senior Resident Agent, FBI Savannah; John Brit, Savannah/Jacksonville Team Leader, U.S. Postal Inspection Service; David Lyons, U.S. Marshal for the Southern District of Georgia; Maj. Fred Cole, Chief Deputy of the Coffee County Sheriff's Office; and Capt. Marcus Dunlap, Coffee County Sheriff's Office. WAYCROSS, Ga.: Two dozen defendants have been indicted on federal conspiracy charges after a transnational, multi-year investigation into a human smuggling and labor trafficking operation that illegally imported Mexican and Central American workers into brutal conditions on South Georgia farms. The newly unsealed, 54-count indictment in USA v. Patricio et al. details felony charges resulting from Operation Blooming Onion, an Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Forces (OCDETF) investigation. The multi-agency investigation, led by Homeland Security Investigations and other federal agencies, spans at least three years, and the 53-page indictment documents dozens of victims of modern-day slavery while spelling out the illegal acts that brought these exploited workers to the United States and imprisoned them under inhumane conditions as contract agricultural laborers, said David H. Estes, Acting U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of Georgia. "The American dream is a powerful attraction for destitute and desperate people across the globe, and where there is need, there is greed from those who will attempt to exploit these willing workers for their own obscene profits," said Acting U.S. Attorney Estes. "Thanks to outstanding work from our law enforcement partners, Operation Blooming Onion frees more than 100 individuals from the shackles of modern-day slavery and will hold accountable those who put them in chains." "OCDETF Operation Blooming Onion maximized the expertise of multiple law enforcement agencies and leveraged analytical and coordination support from OCDETF's International Organized Crime Intelligence and Operations Center (IOC-2) to target an international criminal organization engaged in human trafficking and visa fraud," said OCDETF Director Adam W. Cohen. "The U.S. Attorney's Office's leadership of this multi-agency law enforcement effort positions us to disrupt and dismantle the operations of transnational criminal networks that pose the greatest threat to our communities and to the Nation." As described in the indictment, investigators from Homeland Security Investigations, the U.S. Department of Labor, U.S. Department of State's Diplomatic Security Service, the U.S. Postal Inspection Service, and the FBI began investigating the Patricio transnational criminal organization in November 2018. The indictment alleges that in or before 2015, 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 activities took place within the Southern, Middle, and Northern Districts of Georgia; the Middle District of Florida; the Southern District of Texas; and Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and elsewhere. "The conspirators required the workers to pay unreasonably high 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, a 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 rapping, 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. In the Southern District of Georgia, these activities were alleged to have taken place in the counties of Atkinson, Bacon, Coffee, Tattnall, Toombs and Ware as farmers paid the conspirators to provide contract laborers. 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. Then, as the continuing investigation into the conspiracy moved forward in late 2019, the indictment 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 Patricio 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. Those indicted in USA v. Patricio et al. and their charges include: Maria Leticia Patricio, 70, of Nichols, Ga., charged with Conspiracy to Commit Mail Fraud; two counts of Mail Fraud; Conspiracy to Engage in Forced Labor; and Conspiracy to Commit Money Laundering; Daniel Mendoza, 40, of Ruskin, Fla., charged with Conspiracy to Commit Mail Fraud; Conspiracy to Engage in Forced Labor; and Conspiracy to Commit Money Laundering; Nery Rene Carrillo-Najarro, 56, Douglas, Ga., charged with Conspiracy to Commit Mail Fraud; Conspiracy to Engage in Forced Labor; 14 counts of Forced Labor; and Conspiracy to Commit Money Laundering; Antonio Chavez Ramos, 46, of Tony Chavez, " 38, a citizen of Mexico illegally present in the United States, charged with Conspiracy to Commit Mail Fraud; Conspiracy to Engage in Forced Labor; four counts of Forced Labor; and Conspiracy to Commit Money Laundering; JC Longoria Castro, 46, Vidalia, Ga., charged with Conspiracy to Commit Mail Fraud; Conspiracy to Engage in Forced Labor; four counts of Forced Labor; and Conspiracy to Commit Money Laundering; Victoria Chavez Hernandez, 38, a citizen of Mexico illegally present in the United States, charged with Conspiracy to Commit Mail Fraud; Conspiracy to Engage in Forced Labor; and Conspiracy to Commit Money Laundering; Enrique Duque Tovar, 36, of Axon, Ga., charged with Conspiracy to Commit Mail Fraud; Conspiracy to Engage in Forced Labor; nine counts of Forced Labor; and Conspiracy to Commit Money Laundering; Charles Michael King, 31, of Waycross, Ga., charged with Conspiracy to Commit Mail Fraud; Conspiracy to Engage in Forced Labor; and Conspiracy to Commit Money Laundering; Stanley Neal McGauley, 38, of Waycross, charged with Conspiracy to Commit Mail Fraud; Conspiracy to Engage in Forced Labor; and Conspiracy to Commit Money Laundering; Luis Alberto Martinez, a/k/a "Chino Martinez," 41, of Tifton, Ga., charged with Conspiracy to Commit Mail Fraud; Conspiracy to Engage in Forced Labor; and Conspiracy to Commit Money Laundering; Delia Ibarra Rojas, 33, of Lyons, Ga., charged with Conspiracy to Commit Mail Fraud; Conspiracy to Engage in Forced Labor; three counts of Forced Labor; and Conspiracy to Commit Money Laundering; Juana Ibarra Carrillo, 46, of Alma, Ga., charged with Conspiracy to Commit Mail Fraud; Conspiracy to Engage in Forced Labor; and Conspiracy to Commit Money Laundering; Donna Michelle Rojas, a/k/a "Donna Lucio," 33, of Collins, Ga., charged with Conspiracy to Commit Mail Fraud; Conspiracy to Engage in Forced Labor; three counts of Forced Labor; and Conspiracy to Commit Money Laundering; Margarita Rojas Cardenas, a/k/a "Maggie Cardenas," 43, of Reidsville, Ga., charged with Conspiracy to Commit Mail Fraud; Conspiracy to Engage in Forced Labor; three counts of Forced Labor; Conspiracy to Commit Money Laundering; and Tampering with a Witness; Juan Francisco Abrego Campos, 42, a citizen of Mexico illegally present in the United States, charged with Conspiracy to Commit Mail Fraud; Conspiracy to Engage in Forced Labor; and Conspiracy to Commit Money Laundering; Rosalvo Garcia Martinez, a/k/a "Chava Garcia," 33, of Haines City, Fla., charged with Conspiracy to Commit Mail Fraud; Conspiracy to Engage in Forced Labor; and Conspiracy to Commit Money Laundering; and Tampering with a Witness; Esther Ibarra Garcia, 63, of Dade City, Fla., charged with Conspiracy to Commit Mail Fraud; Conspiracy to Engage in Forced Labor; three counts of Forced Labor; and Conspiracy to Commit Money Laundering; Rodolfo Martinez Maciel, 26, a citizen of Mexico illegally present in the United States, charged with Conspiracy to Commit Mail Fraud; Conspiracy to Engage in Forced Labor; three counts of Forced Labor; and Conspiracy to Commit Money Laundering; Brett Donovan Bussey, 39, of Tifton, Ga., charged with Conspiracy to Commit Mail Fraud; four counts of Mail Fraud; Conspiracy to Engage in Forced Labor; Conspiracy to Commit Money Laundering; and Tampering with a Witness; Linda Jean Facundo, 36, of Tifton, charged with Conspiracy to Commit Mail Fraud; Conspiracy to Engage in Forced Labor; and Conspiracy to Commit Money Laundering; Gumara Canela, 34, of Alma, charged with Conspiracy to Commit Mail Fraud; Conspiracy to Engage in Forced Labor; 14 counts of Forced Labor; and Conspiracy to Commit Money Laundering; Daniel Merari Canela Diaz, 24, a citizen of Mexico illegally present in the United States, charged with Conspiracy to Commit Mail Fraud; Conspiracy to Engage in Forced Labor; and Conspiracy to Commit Money Laundering; and, Carla Yvonne Salinas, 28, of Laredo, Texas, charged with Conspiracy to Commit Mail Fraud; Conspiracy to Engage in Forced Labor; and Conspiracy to Commit Money Laundering. The charges of Conspiracy to Engage in Forced Labor, and Forced Labor, each carry statutory penalties of up to life in prison, while the charges of Conspiracy to Commit Mail Fraud, Mail Fraud, Money Laundering Conspiracy, and Tampering with a Witness each carry statutory penalties of up to 20 years in prison. Each of the charges also include substantial financial penalties and periods of supervised release after completion of any prison term. There is no parole in the federal system. Criminal indictments contain only charges; defendants are presumed innocent unless and until proven guilty. The case was investigated under the Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Forces (OCDETF) operation. OCDETF identifies, disrupts, and dismantles the highest-level criminal organizations that threaten the United States using a prosecutor-led, intelligence-driven, multi-agency approach. Operation Blooming Onion also is designated as a Priority Transnational Organized Crime Cases. Agencies investigating Operation Blooming Onion include Homeland Security Investigations; 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; U.S. Customs and Border Protection; 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. The case is being prosecuted for the United States by Assistant U.S. Attorney and Human Trafficking Coordinator Tania D. Groover, and Assistant U.S. Attorney and Criminal Division Deputy Chief E. Greg Gillyly Jr., and Assistant U. S. Attorney Xavier A. Cunningham, Section Chief of the Asset Recovery Unit. If you believe you have information about a potential trafficking situation call the National Human Trafficking Hotline at 1-888-373-7888. Anti-Trafficking Hotline Advocates are available 24/7 to take reports of potential human trafficking. All reports are confidential and you may remain anonymous. Interpreters are available. The information you provide will be reviewed by the National Hotline and forwarded to specialized law enforcement and/or service providers where appropriate. Press Release Number: 159-21 Two dozen people were indicted in Georgia last month on charges of smuggling Mexican and Central American immigrants to the United States and forcing them to live in camps and work on farms in the state in what authorities say was an illegal enterprise akin to "modern-day slavery." Named "Operation Blooming Onion," the year-long probe brought together multiple federal agencies to investigate a "transnational criminal organization" that allegedly engaged in human trafficking, visa fraud, forced labor, mail fraud, money laundering and other crimes that earned the collaborators more than \$200 million. The collaborators of the ring are accused of taking advantage of and defrauding the federal visa program for guest farmworkers, known as H-2A, to bring immigrant workers from Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras and other countries to the United States.At least two workers died under the working conditions, another was repeatedly raped, while others were kidnapped and threatened with death, according to the allegations in the indictment. Workers were also forced to work at gunpoint, the court documents say, earning 20 cents for each bucket of onions they dug up with their hands. Some were sold to farms in other states. The defendants face charges that can carry up to a life sentence.The operation represents one of the country's largest human-trafficking and visa fraud investigations, according to the Department of Justice.It is also the first under a new model pursued by Immigration and Customs Enforcement, known as ICE, that deepens its focus on employer accountability, rather than the immigrant workers that are being taken advantage of. In October, Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas issued a memo directing immigration authorities to cease the massive worksite raids that were used as an enforcement tactic under then-President Donald Trump.Mayorkas said the tactic, which led to the arrests of sometimes hundreds of unauthorized immigrants, was not focused on "exploitative employers." This operation illustrates ICE's effort to further focus on aiding immigrant victims and cracking down on employers who take advantage of visa programs and unauthorized workers, said ICE officials who are familiar with the case and the shift in priorities and who asked not to be identified because they were not permitted to speak publicly.The hope, the officials said, is to work with the immigrant communities and change the perception of ICE among groups that have historically been suspicious of the law enforcement agency, so that immigrants or exploited workers feel comfortable coming forward to aid investigations. "We want to have them cooperate with us to go after these employers who are kind of using this underserved population as a means to increase their bottom line," one of the officials said.In this case, more than 100 workers were freed "from the shackles of modern-day slavery," David Estes, the acting U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of Georgia, said in a statement, adding that the operation "will hold accountable those who put them in chains." "The American dream is a powerful attraction for destitute and desperate people across the globe, and where there is need, there is greed from those who will attempt to exploit these willing workers for their own obscene profits," he said.The first of about two dozen named defendants, and the person for whom the "transnational criminal organization" described in the indictment appears to be named, is Maria Leticia Patricio, 70, of Nichols, Georgia. She was charged with conspiracy to commit mail fraud, two counts of mail fraud, conspiracy to engage in forced labor, and conspiracy to commit money laundering. Patricio pleaded not guilty, and Juanita Holmes Bostick, the lawyer who represents Patricio, according to court documents, declined to comment. Other named defendants who have been arraigned in court have also pleaded not guilty. Three of the defendants — Victoria Chavez Hernandez, Jose Carmen Duque Tovar and Rodolfo Martinez Maciel — are "considered fugitives and actively are being sought," the Department of Justice said Thursday. They face charges ranging from conspiracy to commit mail fraud to forced labor. "This is an ongoing investigation," said Barry Paschal, a spokesperson for the U.S. Attorney's office for the Southern District of Georgia. "I'm sure there will be plenty more to come out of this in the months and years to come."The criminal enterprise was allegedly widespread and operated within Georgia, Florida, Texas, Mexico, Guatemala and Honduras. Court documents state that the defendants would threaten the victims with violence and deportation; charge them exorbitant fees they couldn't afford for transportation, housing and food; and withhold travel and identification documents to force them to work.For years, migrants were brought to the United States under false pretenses and pressed to work on farms as day laborers and live in dirty, cramped conditions without regular access to food and water, according to the indictment. Some were also illegally forced to do lawn care or work on construction sites or in restaurant kitchens, the indictment states.The indictment also alleges that the defendants spent their earnings lavishly on new cars and trucks and gambled millions of dollars at the Seminole Hard Rock Hotel and Casino in Tampa, Florida. The casino said it had been cooperating with federal authorities for more than a year. "The casino files all required financial reports consistently," said casino spokesperson Gary Bitner. "This case was no exception."Paschal said his office is continuing to look for victims and encouraged anyone with information to contact the National Human Trafficking Hotline. Meanwhile, the workers who were freed are receiving assistance from a team of victim service providers from both government and nongovernment organizations, though it is unclear what their futures may hold. Last year, an NBC News investigation found that as the federal visa program for guest farmworkers, known as H-2A, has expanded it has left more guest workers vulnerable to abuse.Federal laws are supposed to ensure decent working conditions, fair pay and safe housing for guest workers, who are tied to the employers who sponsor them and must return to their home countries after the short-term visas expire. But workers are often reluctant to speak out against employers who are responsible for their housing, transportation, pay and their ability to stay in the U.S., workers and labor advocates say. The workers also are often in remote, rural areas and don't speak the language. "Access to justice is really kind of a practical impossibility for a lot of these workers," Daniel Costa, the director of immigration law and policy research at the Economic Policy Institute, a liberal think tank, said.Costa said the extent of the allegations in the indictment was "evidence of the scale of lawbreaking that's going on in these programs and the ability of employers and recruiters to really be pretty bold, because they know for the most part nobody's looking into what they're doing." Charles Kuck, a longtime immigration attorney in Georgia who has worked on H-2A cases and investigations, said the raid and indictment are both "unusual when we know that the conditions for workers that they described are not unusual. This is just people getting caught." Kuck said while there are many H-2A employers who follow the rules and do everything right, "there are a lot of bad apples out there." "I think it's a sign that the administration takes seriously the problem of human trafficking and mistreatment of workers that come on visas and things that may not have been priorities under the prior administration, even though they began the investigation as such," Kuck said. The memo released by Mayorkas appears to make public that signal of the agency's new priority. "We can most effectively protect the American labor market, the conditions of the American worksite, and the dignity of the individual by focusing our worksite enforcement efforts on unscrupulous employers," Mayorkas said in the memo.Costa said the memo's guidance could be a "very big deal" and "a really positive step going more towards protecting the workers themselves and going after bad employers."Daniella SilvaPhXil McCausland Published: 13:04 BST, 6 December 2021 | Updated: 18:12 BST, 6 December 2021 A modern-day slavery ring has been busted in Georgia where workers were raped, kidnapped and imprisoned in squalid camps, according to prosecutors. The crooks raked in more than \$200 million by luring in over 100 desperate migrants from Mexico and Central America to the U.S, a federal indictment says.At least two people died in the brutal conditions that saw workers forced to handpick onions at gunpoint for just 20 cents per bucket in sweltering heat, and another was repeatedly kidnapped and raped. They were kept in squalid camps surrounded by electric fences or cramped living quarters, including dirty trailers with raw sewage leaks.The migrants also reportedly had their passports and documents taken from them to deter them from escaping. Two dozen members of the alleged gang have now been indicted on mail fraud, forced labor, money laundering and witness tampering charges following a three-year, multi-agency federal probe known as 'Operation Blooming Onion.' Only two of the defendants are described as business owners - most are contractors and recruiters. The indictment alleges workers from Mexico, Honduras, and Guatemala were forced to live in squalor on the business properties, like the farm and property of Charles King, of Kings Berry Farms in Waycross, Georgia Guest workers harvest a Vidalia onion field in Lyons, Georgia (file photo, June, 2013)Some of the migrants allegedly worked at Hilltop Packing Company, owned by defendant Stanley McGauley, according to the 50-page indictment.Federal officials say the slavery ring extended across southern Georgia where farmers paid the conspirators to provide contract laborers. Often, they were sold to other members of the crime ring in the southern Georgia counties of Atkinson, Bacon, Coffee, Tattnall, Toombs and Ware. But the illegal activities extended within the Southern, Middle, and Northern Districts of Georgia; the Middle District of Florida; the Southern District of TexasThere were essentially three aspects to the alleged human trafficking operation: misusing the H-2A visa program to bring in workers from Mexico, Guatemala and Honduras under the pretext of being agricultural workers; abusing and exploiting the workers to make money; and laundering the proceeds through big cash purchases, cashier's checks and a casino.Investigators have dubbed the gang the "Patricio TCO" (a transnational criminal organization) after Maria Patricio, a 70-year-old resident of Nichols, Georgia.She is accused of filing fraudulent petitions to bring workers into the United States via the country's H-2A work visa program. Patricio has pleaded not guilty to the charges against her. VICE reports Under H-2A, a worker's legal status is contingent on remaining under the employment of the party that sponsored their visa. This means they are tied to that sponsor and cannot simply pick up sticks and work for someone else.Starting in at least 2015, the criminals started to haul in thousands of workers, allegedly promising them they would be paid under the terms of a contract - typically \$10 to \$12 per hour and would be provided with transportation, housing and food.The criminal enterprise would then send dozens of false petitions to the government seeking more than 71,000 laborers for an 'agricultural employer.' The US then issued 'thousands' of these visas to foreign nationals.Georgia is second only to Florida for most H-2A workers in the nation.Once the more than 100 victims were brought into the country,they were kept in cramped, unsanitary quarters in camps with little or no food, limited plumbing and without safe water.Migrant workers were also allegedly charged unlawful fees they could not afford, and some were illegally forced to do lawn care, construction, and restaurant work.Others were threatened with violence or deportation, the indictment states, and they would coerce the workers and witnesses to provide the federal government with 'materially false information' to hide their illegal activities.Federal officials say the slavery ring extended across southern Georgia where farmers paid the conspirators to provide contract laborers. The victims are now reportedly receiving aid from Victim/Witness services staff and NGOs. Under United States law, they may be protected from deportation. Published: 13:04 BST, 6 December 2021 | Updated: 18:12 BST, 6 December 2021 A modern-day slavery ring has been busted in Georgia where workers were raped, kidnapped and imprisoned in squalid camps, according to prosecutors. The crooks raked in more than \$200 million by luring in over 100 desperate migrants from Mexico and Central America to the U.S, a federal indictment says.At least two people died in the brutal conditions that saw workers forced to handpick onions at gunpoint for just 20 cents per bucket in sweltering heat, and another was repeatedly kidnapped and raped. They were kept in squalid camps surrounded by electric fences or cramped living quarters, including dirty trailers with raw sewage leaks.The migrants also reportedly had their passports and documents taken from them to deter them from escaping. Two dozen members of the alleged gang have now been indicted on mail fraud, forced labor, money laundering and witness tampering charges following a three-year, multi-agency federal probe known as 'Operation Blooming Onion.' Only two of the defendants are described as South Georgia business owners - most are contractors and recruiters. The indictment alleges workers from Mexico, Honduras, and Guatemala were forced to live in squalor on the business properties, like the farm and property of Charles King, of Kings Berry Farms in Waycross, Georgia Guest workers harvest a Vidalia onion field in Lyons, Georgia (file photo, June, 2013)Some of the migrants allegedly worked at Hilltop Packing Company, owned by defendant Stanley McGauley, according to the 50-page indictment.Federal officials say the slavery ring extended across southern Georgia where farmers paid the conspirators to provide contract laborers. 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Patricio has pleaded not guilty to the charges against her. VICE reports Under H-2A, a worker's legal status is contingent on remaining under the employment of the party that sponsored their visa. This means they are tied to that sponsor and cannot simply pick up sticks and work for someone else.Starting in at least 2015, the criminals started to haul in thousands of workers, allegedly promising them they would be paid under the terms of a contract - typically \$10 to \$12 per hour and would be provided with transportation, housing and food.The criminal enterprise would then send dozens of false petitions to the government seeking more than 71,000 laborers for an 'agricultural employer.' The US then issued 'thousands' of these visas to foreign nationals.Georgia is second only to Florida for most H-2A workers in the nation.Once the more than 100 victims were brought into southern Georgia under the program and were kept in cramped, unsanitary quarters in camps with little or no food, limited plumbing and without safe water, according to the indictment.Migrant workers were also allegedly charged unlawful fees they could not afford, and some were illegally forced to do lawn care, construction, and restaurant work.Others were threatened with violence or deportation, the indictment states, and they would coerce the workers and witnesses to provide the federal government with 'materially false information' to hide their illegal activities.Federal officials say the slavery ring extended across southern Georgia where farmers paid the conspirators to provide contract laborers. 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Those crimes were allegedly 'aided and abetted' by the only two defendants described in the indictment as business owners - Charles King, the owner of Kings Berry Farms, and Stanley McGauley, the owner of Hilltop Packing.They are now facing charges including mail fraud and mail fraud conspiracy, forced labor and forced labor conspiracy, money laundering conspiracy and witness tampering. The U.S. Attorney's Office believes it may be one of the country's largest-ever human trafficking and visa fraud investigations, VICE reports. The feds opened the investigation into the gang in November 2019, involving Homeland Security Investigations, the Labor Department, the Department of State's Diplomatic Security Service, the U.S. Postal Inspection Service, and the FBI. During the investigation, 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. When asked about the status of the alleged victims, Barry Paschal, a spokesperson for the US Attorney's Office for the Southern District of Georgia said: 'Victim/Witness services staff and NGOs are assisting the rescued victims (approximately 102).'In specific circumstances, federal law protects victims of crime from deportation,' he added, as U.S. Attorney Estes urged other victims of human trafficking to come forward. "We're aware of somewhere around 70,000 who have come in under [the H-2A] program fraudulently," Estes said at a news conference on November 22. "We have 100 actual victims in our district that we were able to locate." David H. Estes, Acting U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of Georgia, speaks during a news conference November 22, 2021."The American dream is a powerful attraction for destitute and desperate people across the globe, and where there is need, there is greed from those who will attempt to exploit these willing workers for their own obscene profits,' he added."Thanks to outstanding work from our law enforcement partners, Operation Blooming Onion frees more than 100 individuals from the shackles of modern-day slavery and will hold accountable those who put them in chains."OCDETF Operation Blooming Onion maximized the expertise of multiple law enforcement agencies and leveraged analytical and coordination support from OCDETF's International Organized Crime Intelligence and Operations Center (IOC-2) to target an international criminal organization engaged in human trafficking and visa fraud," said OCDETF Director Adam W. Cohen."The U.S. Attorney's Office's leadership of this multi-agency law enforcement effort positions us to disrupt and dismantle the operations of transnational criminal networks that pose the greatest threat to our communities and to the Nation."In a statement, ICE officials also said Operation Blooming Onion is the first investigation closed under the agency's new 'labor exploitation model,' after Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas announced in October that instead of targeting unauthorized workers in mass raids on workplaces, authorities will take aim at 'exploitative employers,' and businesses that violate labor laws. The federal government opened an investigation into the so-called 'Patricio TCO' gang in November 2019, involving Homeland Security Investigations, the Labor Department, the Department of State's Diplomatic Security Service, the U.S. Postal Inspection Service, and the FBI. During the investigation, 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.As a result, 24 members of the criminal gang have been indicted on charges including mail fraud and mail fraud conspiracy, forced labor and forced labor conspiracy, money laundering conspiracy and witness tampering.They are accused of misusing the H-2A visa program to bring in workers from Mexico, Guatemala and Honduras under the pretext of being agricultural workers; abusing and exploiting the workers to make money; and laundering the proceeds through big cash purchases, cashier's checks and a casino.Once the migrants were brought into the country on the promise of a salary, transportation and living, a federal indictment says, they were kept in cramped, unsanitary quarters in camps with little or no food, limited plumbing and without safe water.Migrant workers were also allegedly charged unlawful fees they could not afford, and some were illegally forced to do lawn care, construction, and restaurant work.Others were threatened with violence or deportation, the indictment states, and they would coerce the workers and witnesses to provide the federal government with 'materially false information' to hide their illegal activities.Federal officials say the slavery ring extended across southern Georgia where farmers paid the conspirators to provide contract laborers. 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Often, they were sold to other members of the crime ring in the southern Georgia counties of Atkinson, Bacon, Coffee, Tattnall, Toombs and Ware. But the illegal activities extended within the Southern, Middle, and Northern Districts of Georgia; the Middle District of Florida; the Southern District of TexasThere were essentially three aspects to the alleged human trafficking operation: misusing the H-2A visa program to bring in workers from Mexico, Guatemala and Honduras under the pretext of being agricultural workers; abusing and exploiting the workers to make money; and laundering the proceeds through big cash purchases, cashier's checks and a casino. And, allegedly, the crime ring tried to pull a ton of workers into this scheme: Starting in 2015 at the latest, the organization sent multiple false petitions to the government seeking over 71,000 laborers for an "agricultural employer," the indictment alleges. The U.S. then issued "thousands" of these visas to foreign nationals. The indictment also alleges that between September 2018 and November 2019, a member of the crime ring "repeatedly raped, kidnapped, and tried to kill Victim 12." Those crimes were allegedly "aided and abetted" by the only two defendants expressly described as business owners in the indictment: Charles King, the owner of Kings Berry Farms and a registered agent of Hilltop Packing, and Stanley McGauley, Both are residents of Waycross, Georgia. Neither could immediately be reached for comment. The feds started investigating in November 2018. Homeland Security Investigations, the Labor Department, the Department of State's Diplomatic Security Service, the U.S. Postal Inspection Service, and the FBI were all involved in the case. A few members of the crime ring have been indicted in court, but the vast majority of the victims have not. The indictment also alleges, "Witnesses to the crime have been threatened with violence or deportation, and they have been threatened with violence or deportation, and they have been threatened with violence or deportation," Paschal said. In a press conference this week, Estes urged other victims of human trafficking to come forward. "We're aware of somewhere around 70,000 who have come in under this program fraudulently," Estes said. "We have 100 actual victims in our district that we were able to locate."

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