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ILLEGAL ALIEN HOSTAGE TAKERS SENTENCED IN MANATEE COUNTY CASE

Tampa, Florida - This week, United States District Judge Susan C. Bucklew sentenced Luis Francisco Pineda-Hidalgo, a/k/a Sergio Ferlandi-Calderon (a 20-year-old alien born in Mexico and now claiming Guatemalan citizenship), to 10 years in federal prison for conspiring to transport more than 25 illegal aliens, transporting 17 illegal aliens, smuggling two illegal aliens into the United States, hostage taking, obstruction of justice, witness tampering, and illegal entry into the United States. Judge Bucklew also sentenced a co-conspirator, Yoni Hidalgo-Calderon (a 22-year-old alien born in Mexico and illegally present in the United States) to 6 years and 6 months in federal prison for assisting in the hostage taking.

According to court records, on the evening of September 4, 2008, Manatee County Sheriff's deputies thwarted a hostage - taking event and took Pineda-Hidalgo and Hidalgo-Calderon into custody. Deputies determined that Pineda-Hidalgo and Hidalgo-Calderon were transporting illegal aliens and were holding one of the aliens hostage until his transportation fees were paid by his brother. United States Border Patrol agents responded to render assistance and determined that Pineda-Hidalgo, Hidalgo-Calderon, and the five aliens being transported (including the hostage) were illegally present in the United States without admission or parole. All were taken into administrative custody for processing and transported to the Border Patrol station in Tampa, Florida.

Once at the Border Patrol station, the five passenger aliens were interviewed separately and each stated that he was a Mexican citizen illegally in the U.S. and was being transported from either Arizona, Georgia, or South Carolina, to Florida and Arizona by Pineda-Hidalgo and Hidalgo-Calderon.

According to the hostage alien, he had agreed to pay the defendants' smuggling organization a fee in installments after he was delivered to his brother in Florida. However, when the hostage actually was delivered to his brother, Pineda-Hidalgo and Hidalgo-Calderon demanded the entire \$1,350 transportation fee and threatened the life of the hostage if the fee was not paid immediately. Pineda-Hidalgo and Hidalgo-Calderon then drove away with the hostage and their other passengers. The hostage's brother reported the incident to the Manatee County Sheriff's Office. Thanks to a quick-thinking, Spanish-speaking Manatee County Sheriff's deputy, the defendants were cajoled into returning to meet with the hostage's brother, who told them he had come up with the money. The defendants were then taken into custody.

This case was investigated by the United States Border Patrol, the Manatee County Sheriff's Office, and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). It was prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorney Donald L. Hansen.