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News Releases

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Florida family pleads guilty to enslaving farm workers and other related charges

FT. MYERS, Fla. - Five Mexican national family members that were illegally living in the United States pleaded guilty to charges relating to a scheme to enslave Mexican and Guatemalan immigrants and force them into agricultural labor as farm workers following a U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) led investigation.

Immokalee, Florida family members Cesar Navarrete, Geovanni Navarrete, Villhina Navarrete, Ismael Michael Navarrete and Antonio Zuniga Vargas pleaded guilty on Tuesday, September 2, 2008, to harboring undocumented foreign nationals for private financial gain and identify theft. The Navarrete family owned and operated an agricultural business in Immokalee, Florida, which employed illegal aliens to perform field work. Cesar and Geovanni Navarrete additionally pleaded guilty to beating, threatening, restraining and locking workers in trucks to force them to work for them as agricultural laborers. Cesar Navarrete also pleaded guilty to re-entering the United States after being convicted of a felony and thereafter deported and Ismael Navarrete also pleaded guilty to document fraud. Cesar and Geovanni Navarrete face up to 35 and 25 years in prison, respectively. The other defendants face a range of 10 to 25 years in prison. Sentencing is scheduled for various dates in September and December 2008.

The defendants were accused of paying the workers minimal wages, driving them into debt, while simultaneously threatening physical harm if the workers left their employment before their debts had been repaid to the family.

Previously, co-defendant Jose Navarrete entered a guilty plea for conspiracy to harbor and to harboring undocumented foreign nationals for financial gain as well as possession of false documents, identify theft and re-entry after being deported. Jose Navarrete faces up to 37 years in prison.

The prosecution of human trafficking offenses is a top priority of the Justice Department. In the last seven fiscal years, the Civil Rights Division, in conjunction with the U.S. Attorneys' Offices, has increased by nearly seven-fold the number of human trafficking cases filed in court as compared to the previous seven fiscal years. In fiscal year 2007, the Department obtained a record number of convictions in human