

For Immediate Release
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**POLICE CHIEF, MAYOR AND VILLAGE TRUSTEE OF COLUMBUS,
NEW MEXICO, INDICTED IN FEDERAL FIREARMS TRAFFICKING CASE**

LAS CRUCES - United States Attorney Kenneth J. Gonzales announced that a federal grand jury in New Mexico has indicted eleven members of a firearms trafficking ring headquartered in Columbus, New Mexico, a small border village across from the Mexican city of Puerto Palomas, on firearms and smuggling charges. The defendants charged in the 84-count indictment include Angelo Vega, the Columbus chief of police; Eddie Espinoza, the mayor of Columbus; and Blas Gutierrez, a village trustee in Columbus.

Ten of the eleven defendants were arrested without incident this morning by teams of federal, state and local law enforcement officers, and will make their initial appearances tomorrow in the federal courthouse in Las Cruces. Defendant **Ignacio Villalobos** has not been apprehended and is considered a fugitive. The officers also executed ten search warrants at eight residences, one business establishment, and at the office of the Columbus Police Department.

The indictment is the result of an intensive year-long investigation initiated by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) and ICE Homeland Security Investigations (HSI), that later expanded to include the Drug Enforcement Administration and the U.S. Attorney's Las Cruces Branch Office. The investigation has been designated as part of the Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force (OCDETF) program. The principal mission of the OCDETF program is to identify, disrupt and dismantle the most serious drug trafficking, weapons trafficking and money laundering organizations, and those responsible for the nation's illegal drug supply.

The indictment alleges that, between January 2010 and March 2011, the defendants

engaged in a conspiracy to purchase firearms for illegal export to Mexico. During this 14-month period, the defendants allegedly purchased approximately 200 firearms from Chaparral Guns in Chaparral, New Mexico, which is owned and operated by defendant Ian Garland. According to the indictment, the defendants purchased firearms favored by the Mexican Cartels, including AK-47-type pistols, weapons resembling AK-47 rifles but with shorter barrels and without rear stocks, and American Tactical 9 mm caliber pistols. The defendants allegedly obtained firearms from Chaparral Guns by falsely claiming they were the actual purchasers of the firearms, when in fact they were acting as “straw purchaser” who were buying the firearms on behalf of others.

During the investigation, law enforcement officers seized 40 AK-47 type pistols, 1,580 rounds of 7.62 ammunition, and 30 high-capacity magazines from the defendants before they crossed the U.S.-Mexico border. The indictment alleges that twelve firearms previously purchased by the defendants later were found in Mexico and were traced back to these defendants. As part of the investigation, every effort was made to seize firearms from defendants to prevent them from entering into Mexico, and no weapons were knowingly permitted to cross the border.

In announcing the indictment, U.S. Attorney Gonzales said, “Gutierrez, Espinoza and Vega were duty sworn to protect and safeguard the people of Columbus, New Mexico. Instead, they increased the risk of harm that the people of Columbus face every day by allegedly using their official positions to facilitate and safeguard the operations of a smuggling ring that was exporting firearms to Mexico. Today’s indictment reflects our unwavering resolve to ensure safety along our Southwest border and to expose and prosecute corrupt officials who seek to profit at expense of the citizenry they are sworn to protect.”

“This investigation, along with the countless others that ATF and HSI have pursued

jointly over the past several years, provides further proof that the trafficking of firearms to Mexico continues to be a significant problem” said William Newell, Special Agent in Charge of the ATF Phoenix Field Division. “The good news is that all the agencies involved in this investigation were fully committed to joining forces to stop this activity and the results speak for themselves.”

“Identifying and arresting individuals involved in criminal activities, especially weapons and drug trafficking, in our Homeland is a national security priority for ICE,” said Manuel Oyola-Torres, Special Agent in Charge of ICE Homeland Security Investigation in El Paso. “ICE HSI special agents will continue working shoulder to shoulder with our federal, state and local law enforcement partners to stop the flow of drugs, weapons and other contraband across the U.S.-Mexico border.”

Joseph M. Arabit, Special Agent in Charge of the Drug Enforcement Administration, El Paso Division, added, “This investigation is an example of our collective efforts to attack drug trafficking organizations at every level, including their important corruption components and gun suppliers. Three of the eleven members of this conspiracy are government officials who violated the public trust by using their positions to facilitate and engage in illegal arms trafficking. We, along with our law enforcement partners, are committed to rooting out this type of corruption and will not allow the criminal activities of a few to tarnish the honorable work that officers and local elected officials perform every day in this region.”

The case is being prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorneys Nathan Lichvarcik and Michael Nammar, and was investigated primarily by ATF, HSI and DEA. John E. Murphy, the United States Attorney for the Western District of Texas, and his El Paso Branch Office staff provided significant assistance to the investigation. The investigation was supported by the

Comandante Chihuahua State Police in Palomas, Mexico and the Secretariat of Public Security in Juarez, Mexico. The U.S. Marshal's Service, U.S. Border Patrol, U.S. Customs and Border Protection, New Mexico State Police, the Las Cruces Police Department, the El Paso Police Department, and other federal, state and local law enforcement agencies also provided assistance during the investigation.

Summary of the Indictment

Count 1 of the indictment charges all eleven defendants with conspiracy to smuggle firearms from the United States to Mexico and with making false statements in connection with the acquisition of firearms. If convicted of this charge, each defendant could receive a sentence of five years of imprisonment and a \$250,000 fine. Counts 2 through 42 of the indictment charge certain defendants with making false statements in connection with the acquisition of firearms; a conviction on any one of these counts carries a maximum penalty of five-years imprisonment and a \$250,000 fine. Counts 43 through 84 of the indictment charges certain defendants with unlawfully concealing and facilitating the transportation of firearms knowing that the firearms were intended for exportation from the United States. The maximum penalty for a conviction on any one of the exportation counts is ten years of imprisonment and a \$250,000 fine.

Charges Against Individual Defendants

Ignacio Villalobos, 24, of Columbus, NM, is charged in three counts of the indictment: conspiracy (Count 1) and two counts of firearms smuggling (Counts 78 and 82).

Blas Gutierrez, 30, of Columbus, NM, charged in thirty-seven counts of the indictment: conspiracy (Count 1); seventeen counts of making false statements in connection with acquisition of firearms (Counts 2, 3, 4, 6, 8, 10, 13, 16, 17, 21, 22, 25, 26, 31, 35, 39 & 41); and nineteen counts of firearms smuggling (Counts 43, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 51, 53, 55, 56, 60, 61, 64, 65, 70, 75, 77, 80 & 83).

Eddie Espinoza, 51, of Columbus, NM, is charged in seven counts of the indictment: conspiracy (Count 1); three counts of making false statements in connection with acquisition of firearms (Counts 19, 23 & 30); and three counts of firearms smuggling (Counts 58, 62 & 69).

Angelo Vega, 40, of Columbus, NM, is charged with conspiracy in Count 1 of the indictment.

Ian Garland, 50, of Chaparral, NM charged in eight counts of the indictment: conspiracy (Count 1); six counts of making false statements in connection with acquisition of firearms (Counts 5, 7, 12, 15, 36 & 40); and one count of firearms smuggling (Count 81).

Alberto Rivera, 40, of Columbus, NM, is charged in nineteen counts of the indictment: conspiracy (Count 1); nine counts of making false statements in connection with acquisition of firearms (Counts 9, 14, 18, 20, 24, 28, 29, 33 & 42); and nine counts of firearms smuggling (Counts 50, 54, 57, 59, 63, 67, 68, 74 & 84).

Miguel Carrillo, 30, of Columbus, NM, is charged in six counts of the indictment: conspiracy (Count 1); two counts of making false statements in connection with acquisition of firearms (Counts 11 & 37); and three counts of firearms smuggling (Counts 44, 52 & 79).

Ricardo Gutierrez, 25, of Columbus, NM, is charged in seven counts of the indictment: conspiracy (Count 1); three counts of making false statements in connection with acquisition of firearms (Counts 27, 32 & 34); and three counts of firearms smuggling (Counts 66, 71 & 76).

Manuel Ortega, 25, of Palomas, Mexico, is charged in two counts of the indictment: conspiracy (Count 1) and firearms smuggling (Count 72).

Vicente Carreon, 26, of Columbus, NM, is charged in two counts of the indictment: conspiracy (Count 1) and firearms smuggling Firearms (Count 73).

Eva Lucie Gutierrez, 21, of Las Cruces, is charged in two counts of the indictment: conspiracy (Count 1) and making false statements in connection with acquisition of firearms (Count 38).

An indictment is only an accusation. All criminal defendants are entitled to a presumption of innocence until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt.

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