

United States Department of Justice

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FBI Los Angeles

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Twenty-Four Defendant Indictment Names Members and Leaders of Notorious MS-13 Gang, Alleging Federal Racketeering Violations, Including Multiple Murders

In the first indictment in Los Angeles to allege racketeering charges against the MS-13 Gang, several members, leaders and associates were arrested early this morning after the return of a federal indictment which charges two dozen defendants, including the executive director of a non-profit gang intervention organization with violations ranging from murder and conspiracy to commit murder and extortion to narcotics trafficking, announced Thomas O'Brien, United States Attorney in Los Angeles, Salvador Hernandez, Assistant Director of the FBI in Los Angeles, and Chief William Bratton of the Los Angeles Police Department.

The sixteen-count federal indictment, unsealed today, charges 24 members and associates of MS-13 with participating in a racketeering conspiracy that involved a variety of crimes including murder, conspiracy to commit murder, extortion, robbery, narcotics trafficking, and witness intimidation, over a period of fifteen years. The indictment alleges the defendants who engaged in the racketeering enterprise, were responsible for seven murders and eight conspiracies to commit murder since 1995.

Five of the defendants charged allegedly conspired to murder a veteran detective with the Los Angeles Police Department's Gang unit. According to the indictment, defendants Carlos Cuentas, Pedro Lopez, Kelvin Melgar, Francisco Morales and Eric Salazar engaged in discussions to kill the detective and even discussed the weapon that would be used to carry out the murder.

The indictment charges Alex Sanchez, the Executive Director of "Homies Unidos," a non-profit organization which purports to use the public and private charitable contributions it receives for gang intervention efforts. Sanchez is charged with racketeering offenses, including conspiracy to murder, during the time he was associated with Homies Unidos.

"Today, in Los Angeles, where the MS-13 gang was formed, we are holding its leaders accountable for the violence and intimidation they have used to bring terror to the citizens living and working within the gang's territory," said Thomas P. O'Brien, the United States Attorney in Los Angeles. "We will continue to work with all of our law enforcement partners, both local and federal, to ensure that this gang's leaders' are held accountable for their criminal conduct."

The indictment announced today is a result of a three-year investigation by the FBI and the LAPD which focused on the leadership of multiple cliques of the MS-13 gang, spanning from 1995 to the present. MS-13 members and associates allegedly used violence and intimidation to control narcotics sales and distribution within its claimed territory, and to collect extortion payments or "rent" from gang members and non-gang members who conducted business in its territory, to include legitimate business.

"As demonstrated by the indictment, local members of the MS-13 gang operated with a level of lethality alarming even by violent street gang standards," said Salvador Hernandez, Assistant Director in Charge of the FBI in Los Angeles. "The FBI will continue to work with its partners to pursue these most violent of criminals to ensure they are removed from our cities' streets."

Los Angeles is the birthplace for MS-13, or "Mara Salvatrucha-13," and was formed by immigrants who fled the civil war in El Salvador in the 1980s. The number "13" relates to the thirteenth letter of the alphabet, or "M," a known reference to "La Eme," or the Mexican Mafia, a California-based prison gang that exercises control over MS-13 members and other street gangs whose members pay taxes in exchange for protection. MS-13 operates in areas of Los Angeles including, but not limited to Rampart, Wilshire, Olympic, and Hollywood. The gang is estimated to have several thousand members in multiple U.S. cities, as well as throughout Central America and Mexico, and is known for its brutality.

Chief William Bratton of the LAPD said, "Since the early 1980s when they were a fledgling gang, to this very day, MS-13 has been a blight on every street where they exist. Whether house to house, street to street, or city to city, MS-13 has spread like a cancer. These indictments, arrests and warrants represent one success in an ongoing effort to rid the community of an element that lacks a single redeeming quality."

Several arrest warrants were served this morning by agents with the FBI and officers with the Los Angeles Police Department. Sixteen of those indicted were already in custody. One defendant was recently killed in southern California.

Those charged in the indictment include:

Jose Alfaro, 31, currently in federal custody

Edwin Arias, 36, currently in state custody

Hugo Bolanos, 34, of Las Vegas, arrested today by FBI Agents in Las Vegas

Juan Cendejas, 34, in federal custody

Carlos Cuentas, 34, in federal custody

Yanira Escalante, 33, of Los Angeles, CA, arrested today

Juan Fuentes, 30, in federal custody

Brian Giron, 20, in state custody

Jose Gonzalez, 30, in federal custody

Paul Cortez Jovel, 35, in federal custody

Luis Lazo, 33, currently in custody in El Salvador

Oscar Linares, 34, in federal custody

Pedro Lopez, 27, in state custody
Juan Mancilla, 40, in federal custody
Josue Martinez, 33, arrested today at LAX
Kelvin Melgar, 29, in federal custody
Fernando Morales, 25, in federal custody
Edwin Navas, 33, currently being sought
Ruben Pineda, 36, of Los Angeles, CA, currently being sought
David Rivera, 30, in federal custody
Eric Salazar, deceased, killed recently in southern California
Alex Sanchez, 37, Bellflower, CA, arrested today
Guillermo Vasquez-Landaver, 40, in federal custody
Marvin Vasquez, 28, of Hollywood, CA, currently being sought

If convicted of the federal racketeering charges, defendants named in the racketeering indictment face a maximum statutory penalty ranging from 25 years to life in prison.

In addition to the twenty-four defendants listed in the indictment, at least fifteen individuals were arrested by LAPD, assisted by the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), the Los Angeles County Department of Probation, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation and the Drug Enforcement Administration, for charges unrelated to the federal indictment. Three children were also taken into protective custody by the Department of Child and Family Services.

Ronald Palacios, 25, of Van Nuys, was also arrested today on outstanding warrant unrelated to federal RICO indictment. Palacios was indicted on drug charges during a previous investigation. Defendants arrested today will be afforded an initial appearance before a United States Magistrate in United States District Court in Los Angeles this afternoon.

An indictment contains allegations that a defendant has committed a crime. Every defendant is presumed to be innocent until proven guilty in court.

This investigation is a result of an investigation by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Los Angeles Police Department, with substantial assistance from the U.S. Bureau of Prisons and the U.S. Department of Justice - Criminal Division's Gang Unit. Assistance during today's operation was provided by the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), the Los Angeles County Department of Probation, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, the Drug Enforcement Administration, and the Department of Child and Family Services. Defendants listed in the indictment will be prosecuted by the United States Attorney's Office in Los Angeles.