

United States Department of Justice

For Immediate Release

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Northern District of California

Joint Task Force Arrests 34 in Salinas, California - Federal Indictments Charge Methamphetamine and Cocaine Trafficking Ring

SAN JOSE, CA—A joint law enforcement task force in Salinas, California today arrested 34 people and executed 30 search warrants in support of a violence suppression program. United States Attorney Joseph P. Russoniello announced that more than 250 federal, state, and local law enforcement officers participated in the operation, culminating an investigation that began in September 2009.

“The turf war between rival gangs has killed innocent bystanders and shredded this community,” U.S. Attorney Russoniello said. “This is a fight fueled by drug trafficking. We will use every tool possible to end the bloodshed.

“Our message to the gangs in Salinas and throughout Monterey County is clear and simple. Stop the Violence,” U.S. Attorney Russoniello added. “You cannot win this fight. All of our forces arrayed here will not let you win. There is another way...without guns, drugs, and gangs. The people of Salinas and the surrounding communities are prepared to help you find that way and stay on that path.

“To the people of Salinas and Monterey County, we believe you have a right to be free from crime and the fear of violence and we are committed to supporting local law enforcement in whatever way we can for as long as it takes to see that peace and security are restored to your communities,” U.S. Attorney Russoniello said. “Law enforcement cannot solve the problem alone; it will require your involvement and support, but this operation today should demonstrate that we in law enforcement are committed to fulfilling the promises we made last September at the Gang Crime Summit to do everything in our power to bring those who prey on your community and commit crime to justice.”

Federal prosecutors unsealed indictments charging 12 defendants with a drug distribution conspiracy and illegal gun possession. Federal indictments alleging drug and gun offenses were previously filed against six additional defendants in Salinas as part of the operation. The Monterey County District Attorney’s office is prosecuting the remaining defendants arrested today.

Since September 2009, agents from the U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), and the Department of Homeland Security, Bureau of Immigration and Customs

Enforcement (ICE), have teamed with agents from the State of California Bureau of Narcotics Enforcement (BNE), California Highway Patrol (CHP), Monterey County Sheriff's Office, the Salinas Police Department, and other state and local agencies to investigate criminal street gangs that have waged open warfare in Salinas. In 2008 and 2009, Salinas reported a total of 55 homicides and more than 200 reported shootings. Of the 55 homicides, 53 are believed to be connected to gang violence. For this time period, the violent crime rate reported for Salinas was more than three times the national average for a city of Salinas's size.

In the first quarter of 2010, the homicide rate in Salinas dropped precipitously, but innocent children were victims of the violence. On Feb. 23, a 6-year old boy, Azahel Cruz, was killed in his home by a bullet fired from nearby Laurel Pocket Park. On April 17, a 10-year old girl was hit by a stray bullet in La Paz Park.

The primary federal indictment unsealed today in San Jose charges 10 individuals with conspiring to distribute cocaine and more than 50 grams of methamphetamine. On April 15, a federal grand jury returned an 11-count indictment charging Frank Garcia, Jose Nuno, Hector Uribe, Jr., Javier Garcia, Francisco Garcia, Geno Lanier King, Dakota Vernon Casperson, Sheena Nicole Casperson, Martin Jose Montoya, and Oscar Munoz Arias.

Jose Nuno, only, is charged with being in possession of a firearm after a domestic violence conviction. The defendants are scheduled to be arraigned on the charges today before United States Magistrate Judge Patricia V. Trumbull in San Jose.

The maximum statutory penalty for the drug distribution conspiracy charged in the Garcia indictment is life imprisonment, with a statutory minimum sentence of 10 years. The maximum fine is \$4,000,000. Any sentence following conviction would be imposed by the court after consideration of the U.S. Sentencing Guidelines and the federal statute governing the imposition of a sentence, 18 U.S.C. § 3553.

Additional Salinas defendants are charged in separate federal indictments as follows:

U.S. v. Raymond Carrasco Lopez, Adrian Angel Lopez (CR 10-00236 JW): conspiracy to distribute methamphetamine. Indictment unsealed today.

U.S. v. Joe Torres Jr. (CR 10-00287 JF): felon in possession of gun. Torres is in custody and was arraigned on April 21.

U.S. v. Omero Venegas, (CR 10-00192 RS): felon in possession of gun. Venegas is in custody with a next scheduled appearance of May 18.

U.S. v. Salvador Puga, Rafael Cacique Jr., and Nicolas Serrano (CR 10-00195 JW): conspiracy to distribute more than 50 grams methamphetamine. Serrano is in custody; Cacique is released on bail. Puga is a fugitive. The next appearance is May 24.

U.S. v. Yesenia Ruelas, (CR 10-00120 JW). On April 12, Ruelas pleaded guilty to being a felon in possession of a gun and was sentenced to 27 months' imprisonment by United States District Court Judge James Ware.

Nat Cousins, Allison Marston Danner, and David Countryman are the Assistant U.S. Attorneys

who are prosecuting the federal cases with the assistance of Kamille Singh, Rosario Calderon, and Nina Williams. The prosecutions are the result of investigations by the U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Drug Enforcement Agency, and the Department of Homeland Security, Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, with the assistance of the U.S. Marshals Service, U.S. Secret Service, and U.S. Department of State, Diplomatic Security Service. Federal agents have teamed with agents from the State of California Bureau of Narcotics Enforcement, California Highway Patrol, California Department of Corrections & Rehabilitation, Monterey County Sheriff's Office, Salinas Police Department, Campbell Police Department, and others.

Further Information:

Case numbers: U.S. v. Frank Garcia et al., (CR 10-0301 JS); U.S. v. Raymond Lopez et al., (CR 10-00236 JW); U.S. v. Joe Torres Jr. (CR 10-00287 JF); U.S. v. Omero Venegas, (CR 10-00192 RS); U.S. v. Salvador Puga et al., (CR 10-00195 JW); U.S. v. Yesenia Ruelas, (CR 10-00120 JW).