

LOCKPORT
SINCE 1821

Union-Sun & Journal



Government to establish border task force in Western New York

Associated Press

November 15, 2006 04:03 pm

— Citing a farm labor contractor who withheld wages from upstate workers and used threats to keep them in line, U.S. Attorney General Alberto Gonzales announced Tuesday the creation of a human trafficking task force in Western New York.

“Human trafficking is a violation of the human body, mind and spirit,” Gonzales said during a stop which also included a helicopter tour of U.S.-Canadian border crossings.

Buffalo was among 10 cities to receive funding last month to focus on anti-trafficking efforts. Nationally, 32 such task forces already exist.

Federal officials pointed to the arrest of Maria Garcia and several family members in Albion, Orleans County, as proof no region is immune to the problem. Garcia pleaded guilty in December 2004 to a forced labor charge following an investigation that began when some Mexican workers she recruited to upstate farms escaped her control and sought help.

Prosecutors said the workers were charged up to \$1,800 for a van ride from Arizona and had money deducted from their pay for rent, food, electricity and rides to the fields. They were told they could not leave crowded housing units unless their debts were paid.

“They had lost all liberties,” said Terrance Flynn, U.S. attorney for New York’s Western District.

The task force, with nearly \$900,000 in federal funding, will train law enforcement agencies to spot potential trafficking victims and organizations and focus resources on prosecutions.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Customs and Border Protection, the FBI and U.S. Department of Labor will work with local agencies and the state police. Law enforcement will also team up with organizations that deal with the immigrant community, such as the International Institute of Buffalo and Farmworkers’ Legal Services.

Gonzales said the government has increased its focus on human trafficking in recent years. In fiscal 2006, 79 people were convicted in federal cases, more than twice the number in the previous year.

“We know that we must work together to fight human trafficking, and we must intensify our efforts,”

Gonzales said. “Because right now the victims of these criminals are out there. They are suffering and they are waiting for our help.”

Western New York is particularly attractive to traffickers, he said, because of its ethnic diversity, numerous farms and use of migrant labor.

Garcia was sentenced last year to 46 months in prison. Her son Elias Botello, who pleaded guilty to conspiracy to commit forced labor, was sentenced to 37 months. Another son, Jose J. Garcia, received a 14-month term for alien harboring and her husband, Jose I. Garcia, was given one year of probation on the same charge.

Copyright © 1999-2008 cnhi, inc.

Photos



Attorney General Alberto Gonzales, center, answers questions Tuesday during a news conference.
Associated Press