



PRESS RELEASE

Justice Department Expands Efforts to Dismantle Human Smuggling Operations and Support Immigration Prosecutions

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For Immediate Release

Office of Public Affairs

Ahead of the third anniversary of the establishment of Joint Task Force Alpha (JTFA), the Justice Department today announced additional efforts to dismantle human smuggling operations and increase accountability for those who violate our immigration laws. Launched in June 2021 by Attorney General Merrick B. Garland and Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro N. Mayorkas, JTFA represents a partnership between the Justice Department and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) with a mandate to disrupt and dismantle human smuggling and trafficking organizations operating in and through Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Mexico. To build on the success of JTFA, including an increase of more than 25% in defendants charged with alien smuggling since 2020, the Justice Department is realigning resources, providing financial incentives, and proposing increased penalties for human smuggling offenses.

The Justice Department also is coordinating with border U.S. Attorneys and their districts, as well as with the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and other law enforcement agencies, to evaluate current needs and resource allocations, and to identify available and potentially new opportunities to address immigration issues.

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Prioritizing Prosecutions Involving Smugglers

The Justice Department will continue to prioritize the prosecution of cases involving human smuggling, working through JTFA — which is led by the Criminal Division’s Human Rights and Special Prosecutions Section — and the efforts of individual U.S. Attorneys’ Offices and their law enforcement partners.

Felony prosecutions for smuggling have been on an upward trajectory, increasing by 27% since 2020. These cases are significant. They include human smuggling of both vulnerable populations and individuals who pose security concerns, as well as unlawful transportation of assets and contraband, high-speed flight from law enforcement and possession of firearms by smuggling defendants. Focusing on felony smuggling prosecutions creates a deterrent effect, not only impacting the defendant but creating a ripple effect that discourages future smuggling. Additional smuggling prosecutions will target known routes utilized and controlled by cartels and other organized criminal groups.

JTFA will continue to focus on the highest-level human smugglers — the worst of the worst. Since its creation in June 2021, JTFA has achieved significant tangible results, including:

- Over 300 arrests, including of leaders, organizers, and significant facilitators;
- Over 240 U.S. convictions;
- Over 170 U.S. defendants sentenced, with significant sentences of 30 years or more in prison;
- Substantial seizures and forfeiture of assets and contraband including millions of dollars in cash, real property, vehicles, firearms and ammunition, and drugs; and
- Multiple indictments and successful extradition requests against foreign leadership targets located in Guatemala, Mexico, and Honduras.

Just this week, the leader of a migrant smuggling organization was [sentenced](#) to 10 years in prison for her role in smuggling over 100 migrants from Honduras to the United States for profit.

Using Financial Rewards to Dismantle the Leadership of Transnational Human Smuggling Networks

The Justice Department and Department of State are launching an Anti-Smuggling Rewards (ASR) Initiative designed to dismantle the leadership of human smuggling organizations that bring migrants through Central America and across the southern U.S. border. The ASR Initiative will use existing statutory authority — through the State Department’s Transnational Organized Crime Rewards Program — to offer financial rewards for information leading to the identification, location, arrest, or conviction of those most responsible for significant human smuggling activities in the region.

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The ASR Initiative will target categories of high-priority human smuggling targets, such as:

- Leaders of certain identified cartels and other transnational organizations responsible for human smuggling through the Western Hemisphere and across the southern U.S. border;
- Leaders and organizers of human smuggling networks responsible for certain identified mass casualty events; and
- Certain identified high-priority international fugitives wanted for human smuggling offenses.

In addition, the Justice Department will offer the possibility of additional rewards to tipsters whose information results in the forfeiture of criminal proceeds of human smuggling activities. The Department of the Treasury, in coordination with the ASR Initiative, will continue to employ its authorities to disrupt high priority human smuggling operations.

Increasing Penalties for the Most Prolific and Dangerous Human Smugglers

Since at least 2016, the Justice Department and DHS have urged the U.S. Sentencing Commission to consider stiffening penalties for those who commit human smuggling offenses. The current sentencing guidelines fail to fully account for the severity or extent of defendants' misconduct in human smuggling cases — resulting in perverse incentives and reduced ability for prosecutors to go after leaders of smuggling organizations. Despite renewed requests from the Justice Department and DHS as recently as last year the Commission has not significantly bolstered penalties for the most dangerous human smugglers.

Thus, the Justice Department and DHS are supporting prosecutors in their efforts to hold accountable individuals charged with dangerous human smuggling, and the Justice Department intends to seek new and increased penalties against human smugglers to properly account for the severity of their criminal conduct and the human misery that it causes. The proposal would make three important changes to U.S. Sentencing Guideline §2L1.1, which governs human smuggling offenses:

- Creating steeper penalty tiers based on the number of people smuggled by the defendant;
- Increasing penalties when the defendant's conduct results in injury or death to more than one person; and
- Ensuring defendants are subject to sentencing enhancements for sexual assault and other types of prohibited sexual conduct committed during the smuggling offense, even if that conduct occurred outside U.S. jurisdiction.

Deploying Justice Department and DHS Resources for Targeted Enforcement Efforts

The Justice Department is partnering with DHS to direct additional prosecutors and support staff to increase federal immigration-related prosecutions in crucial border U.S. Attorneys' Offices. This critical operational partnership is being done in spite of a fiscal year 2024 enacted

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budget that included the largest year-over-year funding decrease to U.S. Attorneys' Offices in Justice Department history. Efforts include deploying additional DHS Special Assistant U.S. Attorneys to border U.S. Attorneys' Offices, assigning support staff detailees to critical U.S. Attorneys' Offices, seeking Justice Department attorneys to serve details in U.S. Attorneys' Offices in border districts, and partnering with federal agencies to identify additional resources to target these crimes.

In addition to surging new resources to border districts, U.S. Attorneys' Offices continue to deploy existing resources and strategies to target immigration crimes.

About Joint Task Force Alpha

The Criminal Division's Human Rights and Special Prosecutions Section leads JTFA in partnership with the U.S. Attorneys' Offices and with dedicated support from the Office of International Affairs; Office of Prosecutorial Development, Assistance, and Training; Narcotic and Dangerous Drug Section; Money Laundering and Asset Recovery Section; Office of Enforcement Operations; and Violent Crime and Racketeering Section. JTFA also relies on substantial law enforcement investment from the DHS, FBI, Drug Enforcement Administration, and other partners. JTFA coordinates closely with foreign law enforcement partners on cross-border investigations, arrests of foreign targets, and extraditions.

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IMMIGRATION

Component

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